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# Mutineers

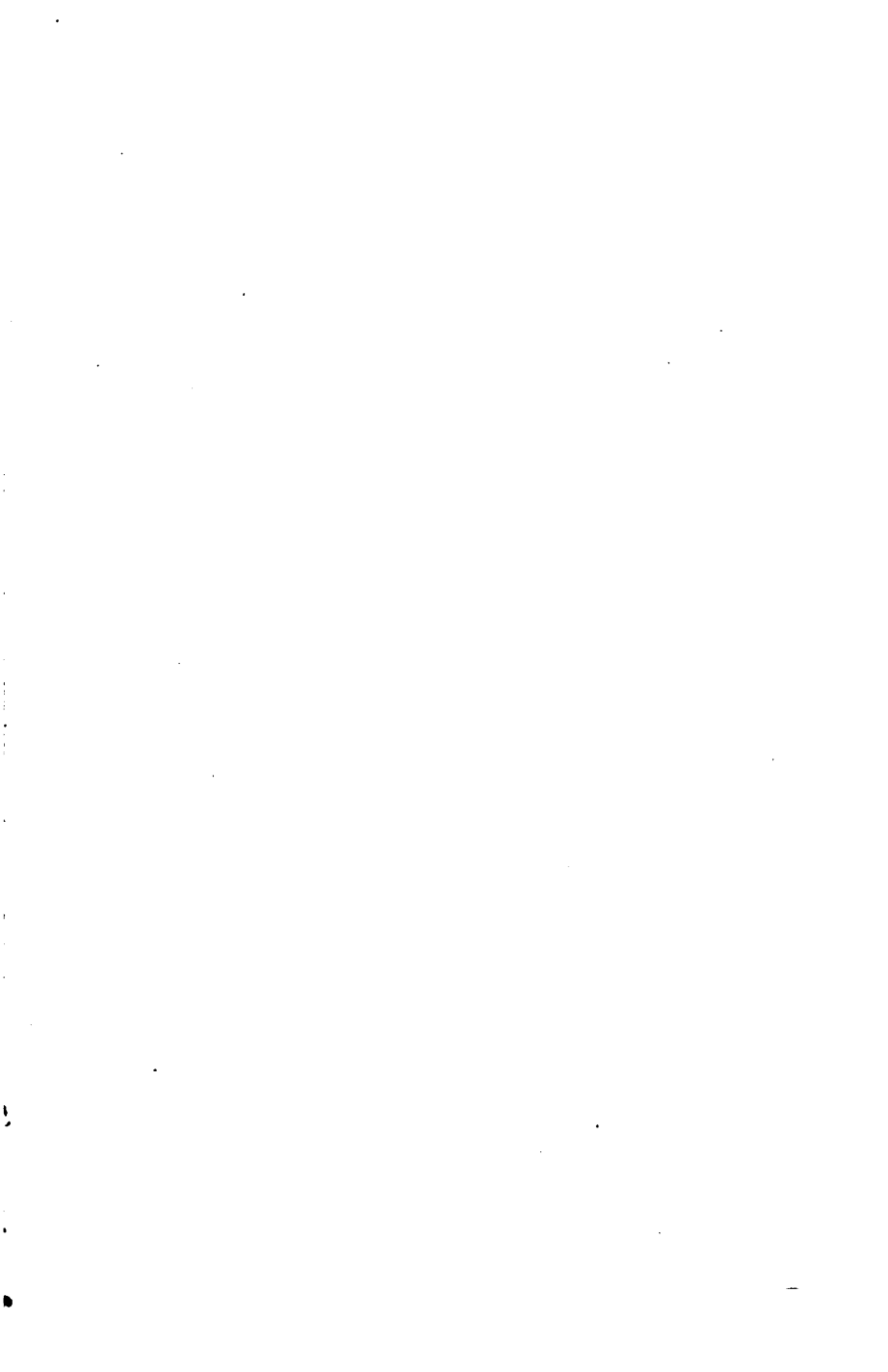
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# MUTINEERS





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# MUTINEERS

BY

ARTHUR E. J. LEGGE

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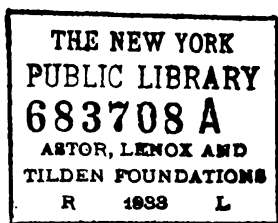


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JOHN LANE  
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1898

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## BOOK I



## CHAPTER I

### IN THE HALL AT SANDLEFORD

THE dark, stone-flagged hall at Sandleford is a cold place in most seasons of the year; and though the spring was unusually early, and the buds on the trees in the drive were already showing delicate flakes of green through their split casings of brown—like glimpses of silken petticoats under rough winter skirts—the glow of burning logs in the wide, lofty fireplace was scarcely strong enough to dissolve entirely the chilliness which lingered in remote corners. Though it was dusk, the lamp which hung from the centre of the beautiful old ceiling had not been lighted, and the deep shadows quivered as the flames sent their flickering rays over the grey pavement and the blackened oak furniture, and gleamed faintly on the deep-toned oil pictures and ancient trophies of weapons and armour which decorated the walls. It was a subdued picture, full of dim suggestions of bygone days. The warmth of life seemed to be gradually ebbing from the old house, and its vigour passing away.

The firelight cast a pale flush on the faces of Lord Seathwaite and his brother as they sat close to the broad hearth gazing into the red mass of burning wood. It concealed the tinge of white in Lord Seathwaite's hair and beard, but it intensified the lines on his forehead and the wrinkles round his eyes. His face was dreamy and thoughtful—



perhaps rather sad ; the face of a kind-hearted man, not too strong in constitution or character, whom life had overburdened without crushing : who had never looked in the face of ecstasy or enthusiasm or despair, but had drifted down the mildly turbulent stream of commonplace with wondering patience and gently protesting acquiescence. He looked fragile beside his powerfully-built brother, whose strong, rather stern, features would have puzzled the casual observer of physiognomy a good deal more. If you looked at Charlie Rafford's mouth, you might perhaps judge him to be fearless, honest, and practical, rather hard, rather sensual, possibly cruel ; if you looked in his eyes, you might see all these characteristics contradicted in turn, and feel that he was a man about whom it would not be safe to jump at conclusions.

'I am so glad you came, Charlie,' said Lord Seathwaite. 'It is a long time since you have been here. Of course I know there have been difficulties, but I hope you and Laura will get on all right together now. I don't say all the blame was on your side, but I am sure that if you try to understand her, and make allowances, and all that sort of thing, you'll find her ready to meet you half-way.'

'Oh, that will be all right, old chap,' said his brother with a smile. 'Laura doesn't approve of me, and she never will ; but it certainly shan't be my fault if we don't get on together. Now that I have once come back to the old place, you'll find it devilish hard to keep me out of it.'

'I don't think I shall try to lock the doors,' answered Lord Seathwaite, glancing at him with the shy, awkward expression peculiar to Englishmen when under the influence of any soft feeling, and then turning to gaze at the fire again. The flames crackled and flared, and the two men sat silent for a minute or two.

Lady Seathwaite did not greatly love her brother-in-law.

She was not in the habit of wasting exuberant affection on many people, and her feelings were usually governed by her somewhat rigid principles. The one romance of her life—not a very highly coloured drama—had lived and died long before she had accepted the offer of sovereignty at Sandleford, and her tastes and emotions had ever afterwards run strictly in the groove prescribed for those who would sit in the stalls in this world without any risk of being relegated to the gallery in the next. With frigid sympathy she fulfilled her duty to her husband and children. She tolerated Lord Seathwaite's tastes and extended a slightly patronising friendliness to any one in whom he was interested. She was thus enabled to enjoy the double luxury of an exalted position and a complacent conscience, heightened by a slight additional sense of martyrdom; for the whole of her husband's family hated her with unanimous cordiality. As she had never concealed from them the sacrifice which she made of her own inclinations in recognising their existence, their ingratitude, being powerless to hurt her, distinctly added to the satisfaction she felt in contemplating her own course of conduct.

Her sense of duty had frequently compelled her to impress on Charlie Rafford her strong disapproval of his character and habits. As Providence had, as it were, condemned his conduct in anticipation by making him a younger son, and as his father had been compelled by agricultural depression and other financial perplexities to perpetuate the condemnation by leaving him an extremely minute income, it had clearly been his duty to remove as much of the stigma as possible by a life of laborious respectability. Unfortunately, he had developed a Bohemian and erratic disposition, which might have sat gracefully on an artistic duke, but was obviously out of place in a briefless barrister. He worked hard by fits and starts, but as a rule

his life was occupied in a variety of pursuits which could not lead to fame or profit. He spent time and money, which he ought not to have been able to afford, in sport and travel. He dabbled in various arts, and was not without skill as an amateur painter and musician. But he had never done anything very seriously.

Rafford was therefore regarded by his sister-in-law as idle and unprincipled. His associates were chosen without any regard for their worldly position or their doctrinal views. He was thirty-five and unmarried, and it was only reasonable to suppose that moral deficiencies caused this avoidance of domestic bliss, for which she was prone to believe that he found some illegitimate substitute. Altogether she disapproved of him ; a fact which she made abundantly clear. As it was apparently impossible to touch his conscience or perturb his temper, their conversations on the subject had generally left her in a state of mortified vanity and impotent rage ; with the result that she had finally been so rude to him that for more than two years he had refused to enter her house, and it was only through the diplomatic exertions of Lord Seathwaite that the breach had at last been patched up, and he had been induced to pay another visit to his old home.

‘What sort of a party have you got staying here?’ asked Rafford, after the pause had lasted some minutes.

‘Oh, much the same as usual. The Challacombes, and Muriel Melthurst, and her husband, and Walter Flaire, and Tommy Woolton, and one or two others. I don’t think there’s any one out of our usual lot, except old Maria Mellins.’

‘What! Old Maria! What has induced Laura to ask her here?’

‘Why, you see, she is looking after that girl Gladys Stour, who is a distant cousin of Laura’s, and Laura likes

to keep up with her relations, and wanted to ask the girl here, so she asked Maria too.'

'What's the girl like?'

'Pretty and bright. I think she is amusing, but Laura thinks she is a bit too much out of hand. I fancy Laura is hatching some feminine plot,' added Lord Seathwaite, with a laugh. 'She made a great point of having Herbert Presterley here to meet them. I don't know if anything is expected to come of it.'

'You don't mean to say that any girl is likely to take a fancy to an ill-conditioned clown like Herbert Presterley!' exclaimed Rafford.

'Oh, I fancy he isn't a bad sort of fellow, though of course he doesn't strike one as being brilliant. But he has got a nice property and plenty of money, and as it is necessary for a penniless girl like Miss Stour to make a good marriage, I suppose Laura thinks it is a chance worth trying.'

'So the goods are to be put on the market! When that sort of thing is done in the lower classes, we call it by an ugly name. However, it isn't my business to criticise. I suppose Laura is too good a general to neglect any precautions in the campaign. She hasn't made the mistake of including any undesirable and possibly attractive young men in the party?'

Lord Seathwaite laughed. Though it had never occurred to him at any time in his life to express a hint of disapproval of any of his wife's plans or actions, it was not altogether disagreeable to him to hear them occasionally made the subject of a little mild ridicule. He generally had a vague idea that Lady Seathwaite's views of life were different from his own; but, as he was never quite sure what his own were, he wisely refrained from giving any expression to the thought. Now that his brother had expressed it for him, he was conscious of a sensation of dim approval.

'There's nobody who seems likely to be dangerous,' he said; 'Laura doesn't take you into account. She is convinced that matrimony has no attractions for you.'

Rafford stared at the fire with a faint smile, not without a tinge of bitterness, on his mouth.

'I am probably an immoral person, and therefore I am not likely to want to marry,' he said: 'and as I am not rich, it would be wrong of me if I *did* want to marry. And yet it is wrong of me to be an immoral person and not to want to marry. Truly I am damned all round; but, at any rate, I am not likely to be dangerous. And the rest of the men are equally safe?'

'I think so,' answered Lord Seathwaite, who had a vague idea that his brother was indulging in sarcasm, but did not understand the cause or the object of it. 'There isn't any one else, except Nigel Maystone—old Colonel Maystone's son—who is coming this evening. He is a shy, awkward sort of creature, I believe, and doesn't count in any way—at least Laura seemed to think so. She has only asked him because she likes his father. Do you know him? You know most people.'

'Yes, I have come across him once or twice. I rather like him. He is decidedly clever and original, though he is full of wild theories, and goes in for Radicalism and Socialism and other similar notions. He'll probably make Laura's hair stand on end before he has been here long.'

'I hope not,' said Lord Seathwaite, much alarmed. 'Could you give him a hint that she has a horror of that sort of thing? It might be awkward otherwise. However, she asked him of her own accord, and I had nothing to do with it,' he added, with a sigh of relief.

'Oh, then you needn't worry. We'll stand on one side and see the sport.'

'Yes,' answered Lord Seathwaite with some hesitation.

The idea of Lady Seathwaite being a subject of sport rather took his breath away. There was a guilty attraction about it, but it was slightly alarming.

The servants came in to close the shutters and light up the hall. The brothers rose, and Rafford expressed a desire to go to his room. Lord Seathwaite remained to greet the new guest, who was expected to arrive at any minute; for the master of Sandleford had strong ideas on the subject of hospitality and the cordiality of a welcome. It must be confessed that his brother's intelligence had disturbed him a little, and it was not without trepidation that he awaited the arrival of this potential firebrand. The firebrand was at that moment coming across the park in the brougham, half paralysed by an agony of nervous apprehension and shyness at the thought of the gathering which he would shortly have to face. He was not a self-possessed young man, and this was his first visit to a big country house.

Charlie Rafford took his candle, and wandered slowly up the broad staircase and along the dusky passages. As he passed each window he paused to look out at the dim, grey landscape, whose features were printed so strongly on his memory. The shape of each bending tree, the lines of each rounded hill, were the written characters of long chapters in his life which had ended so long ago. From the walls his ancestors gazed at him out of their frames with a serene, impassive scrutiny. '*Sunt lacrymæ rerum,*' he muttered to himself, with a faint smile, as he closed the door of his room.

## CHAPTER II

### A MISSIONARY

LADY SEATHWAITE was a proverbially punctual person, and she arrived downstairs before any of her guests were dressed for dinner, with the exception of Mr. Walter Flaire, a bland gentleman of uncertain age; one of those mysterious products of modern civilised life who, on the strength of ladylike tastes and amiable manners, become prominent and popular members of society without either wit, talent, or originality of character; owing their success, perhaps, to the fact that they are too negative to make any enemies. She found him examining with interest the china which filled a cabinet against the wall, on the beauty of which he proceeded to expatiate with fluent emptiness in a high-pitched voice. Her ladyship, who, to tell the truth, had been in some slight dread of finding Charlie Rafford alone there, was much relieved to be thus fortified by the presence of the blameless Flaire.

She was a tall, handsome woman, with a cold, expressionless face. Her black hair intensified the pallor of her complexion, and the dull, heavy look in her eyes added to the general impression of lifelessness which her appearance gave. This impression was dispelled when Lady Seathwaite happened to lose her temper; though the fact displayed itself more in intermittent snarling than in any violent explosion. She had most of the usual virtues and

no very obtrusive faults. But somehow she was not a popular woman.

The guests came dropping into the room with much rustling of silk and lace, and with a growing murmur of subdued voices. At last Rafford arrived, and walked up to greet his sister-in-law with his usual easy, perhaps slightly swaggering, air, but not without a sensation of uneasiness. She showed no signs of embarrassment, but both were glad when the greeting was over, though no one around would have detected such a feeling, except perhaps Walter Flaire, whose knowledge of petty secrets was voluminous and reliable. He watched Rafford saunter away, with a faint smile of amusement, before he resumed the utterance of harmless platitudes in his somewhat cackling tones. Dinner was announced, and Lady Seathwaite glanced round at the assemblage, performing a sort of mental roll-call before preparing to march.

'Who is missing, Seathwaite?' she asked, in rather an injured tone, as if the poor man had been responsible for the peccant guest.

'Aren't we all here?' asked Lord Seathwaite apologetically. 'Let's see: who can be missing? Oh, of course, it is Maystone. He only arrived a very short time ago. I don't think we need wait—ah, here he is—that's right,—*now*, Lady Challacombe,' and offering his arm to that lady, he started hastily in the direction of the dining-room, feeling, no doubt, that the sooner he put the length of mahogany table between himself and his wife, the safer would he be. The remainder of the party followed; a few heads turning to glance at the slim, dark young man who had just entered the room.

Nigel Maystone was about twenty-five years of age. Since leaving Oxford, his time had chiefly been occupied in coaching a sickly boy in a remote country-house, and



his experience of the world and of society was extremely limited. He was naturally shy, and the unusual atmosphere of fashion and worldliness into which he was now for the first time plunging filled him with considerable terror, which was not greatly mitigated by the fact that he believed himself to be an ardent democrat, and despised the fortuitous advantages of rank and wealth. Consequently he felt that he had arrived at a very opportune moment, as, instead of having to advance towards his hostess under the fire of a row of scrutinising eyes, he had barely time to shake her by the hand and confusedly bow to the girl to whom she introduced him at the same instant, before he found himself marching in the procession, and collecting his composure under the comforting influence of the backs of retreating heads, which saw him not. A lady's back hair may be full of consolation for a bashful youth!

In the big dining-room his confidence increased. The subdued light of the shaded candles seemed to protect him from the faces across the broad expanse of white linen—faces half lost in shadow. The delicate colour of the shades, the gleaming silver, the soft hues of the ladies' dresses, the shadowy vastness of the room, through which the servants flitted like ministering ghosts, had a soothing effect on his nerves, and he glanced round, as he ate his soup, with increasing composure. At the age of five-and-twenty, humour is not always paramount in an enthusiastic temperament, and Maystone had arrived at Sandleford with a somewhat ludicrous sense of personal importance. Not being totally free from the vanity of imaginative youth, he had pictured himself in the light of a missionary invading a semi-hostile country. Like most warm-hearted young men, he had been profoundly touched and oppressed by the spectacle of the inequalities of fortune, by the thought of poverty and misery in lurid contrast with luxury

and wealth. Having felt the hampering load of deficient means weighing down his own efforts to start in life, there was something personal in his jealousy of those to whom the path of success had been made smooth. He was not free from the bitterness of a clever man who feels that his talents are not likely to get a fair chance, of a shy man who expects to see his own powers unrecognised, while brazen folly is masquerading as wit and shallow fluency is accepted as wisdom. With the love of classification which only a long experience of this complex world can lessen, he had convinced himself that the higher orders of society were idle, luxurious, and self-centred, ignorant of the falseness of their position, and of the injustice which condemned the great mass of humanity to toil and suffering, while it left to them all that could make life most attractive. He recognised that many of the balances of life needed rectifying. It was not an altogether unprecedented conclusion of a youthful mind which led him to believe that the majority of the well-to-do were blind to these defects, and that he had been specially designated by Fate to point them out.

As both his neighbours were engaged in conversation with the men beyond them, he occupied himself in endeavouring to discover their names from the slips of paper which had been laid on the table to mark their places. The lady whom he had taken in to dinner proved to be a Miss Tintern, and beyond her he made out the name of Sir Thomas Woolton. On his left was Miss Stour, who apparently was engaged in conversation with Mr. Herbert Presterley. He endeavoured to catch the drift of their conversation, with the idea of seizing the first opportunity of securing the attention of one of them to himself. He did not altogether relish being left out in the cold, but somehow was a little uncertain as to the best way of beginning. He felt that he had plenty of solid conversa-

tional wares to offer; but even a missionary must talk the language of his destined converts, and the light remark which was essential as an opening did not occur to him very readily. He began to experience the sensations of a fish out of water, and tried to console himself by reflecting on the worthlessness of all shallow talk; but the consolation did not seem to be altogether satisfying.

Miss Tintern turned a smiling, good-natured face towards him. She was a plump, healthy-looking girl, with a humorous mouth and quaint half-shut eyes.

'Where do you think is the best part of London to take a house?' she asked. 'Sir Thomas can only suggest the British Museum and the boat-house in St. James's Park. He says that one would provide me with physical recreation, and the other with mental. I wonder what the public would think.'

'They'd think you were either the Venus of Milo or a water-nymph, according to the place you choose,' said the ruddy, round-faced young baronet, with a chuckle.

'More likely to take me for either a mummy or a Russian goose,' retorted Miss Tintern. 'Where do you advise us to go, Mr. Maystone? My people always leave it to me to choose, and I want to do something original this year.'

'I should suggest the East End,' said Maystone seriously.

'What! Jamrach's?'

'No, I am quite serious. I think it would be such a good thing if rich people would take houses down there. It would help to bring about that mixture of classes which is the best side of country life, and is entirely wanting in big towns.'

'It's not a bad idea,' said Miss Tintern; 'a sort of feudal castle in Bethnal Green—with village sports on the green, of course, if there *is* a green there—and a body-

guard of costermongers mounted on donkeys in the place of retainers. Will you come and stay with me in my White-chapel Manor House?' she asked, turning to Sir Thomas. 'We will ride forth hawking in Spitalfields, or whatever fields there may be there, and restore the splendours of the days of chivalry.'

'You mayn't hawk there without a licence,' replied Sir Thomas. He was so much pleased with his own wit that he grew purple in the face and chuckled during the whole of the rest of dinner. Miss Tintern, who imagined that he was laughing at her jokes, was quite delighted with him.

Maystone felt rather depressed. Life seemed a serious matter to him, and he did not want to waste time in frivolity. He would be very glad if any one would combat his statements, as then he would have a chance of confuting them. But to turn the things about which one ought to be serious into a joke, seemed quite wrong.

He turned half-savagely towards Miss Stour. She had apparently given up all attempts to extract conversation from Mr. Presterley, who sat stolidly eating by her side, and she was thoughtfully examining the pattern on the table-cloth. Maystone had an instinctive foreboding of sympathy with her. Though her face was bright and animated, there was a vague suggestion of sadness about the lines of her mouth and the droop of her long silky eyelashes. As he turned towards her, she looked up at him with thoughtful grey eyes. He recognised her very considerable beauty with a faint thrill of pleasure. Soft fair hair made a sort of halo above her well-shaped forehead, while her darker eyebrows seemed always on the point of arching into an expression of half-humorous surprise, as though their possessor found much in life that was both puzzling and ridiculous. Her red, full lips redeemed

the appearance of fragility imparted to her face by the creamy paleness of her complexion. She suggested a curious impression of a blend of fairy-like coldness and warm blood.

'Is it a crime to be in earnest about things?' he asked abruptly.

She smiled with evident appreciation of his unconventional address, and looked at him with mingled amusement and sympathy.

'Of course it is,' she said, 'or if not, it is a blunder, and that, as we know, is worse than a crime. Why do you ask? Have you been scattering pearls before—Philistines?'

'No, not exactly. But people always seem to look on one as a sort of idiot if one regards the world as anything but a big toy-shop.'

'I don't think every one does. Your experience of society has been unfortunate.'

'My experience of society is chiefly confined to overgrown schoolboys at Oxford, and under-grown schoolboys whom I have tried to drive through examinations in a remote part of Norfolk, so I suppose I ought not to generalise. But one does feel sometimes as if all the world was against one whenever one tries to take life seriously. Perhaps it is only because the people one belongs to always look at things from a totally different point of view from one's own.'

'Perhaps,' she said; 'I don't know. I don't belong to any one.'

It was certainly not Miss Stour's intention to pose as a forlorn and desolate individual. She was indeed unconscious of any desire to pose at all. But it must be confessed that a feminine love of romance and of the dramatic view of life led her to make this statement in a voice not absolutely robbed of pathos. It cannot be denied that she

would on all occasions have preferred to appear in an interesting light to any man with whom she was brought in contact, and she was not entirely ignorant of the methods by which interest may be awakened. The subtle appeal to Maystone's pity which she had almost unconsciously made did not miss its mark. He looked at her with puzzled and sympathetic eyes.

'What do you mean?' he asked. 'You must belong to some one.'

'No,' she said, 'Lady Maria Mellins takes me out—the old lady in black, up at the end of the table there, next to Lord Challacombe—because she was an old friend of my mother's, and because she is really a kind-hearted old thing, and, moreover, it gives her an interest in life to have a girl to look after. But I haven't a near relation in the world. Lady Seathwaite is the nearest, and she is only my second cousin.'

'Perhaps you find it an advantage in some ways,' Maystone remarked. 'At any rate, it leaves you more free to take your own line in life. You ought to find it possible to avoid walking tamely in the beaten tracks.'

'If you knew more of the world, you wouldn't say that,' she exclaimed. 'How is it possible for a woman to avoid the beaten tracks? They say that our horizon has widened so much in the last few years, but it seems to me that there are and will always be but two courses open to us. One is to marry—to dip into the bag where there are so few prizes and so many blanks. The other is to fritter away our lives with no real purpose or object or hope. Oh, I know you will say that we can find objects, but it isn't so easy if our minds are not utterly mechanical. We may become the weary camp-followers of society, and fill vacant chairs and make necessary backgrounds for younger and more successful people; or we may paddle through slums in old clothes

after people who don't want us, and would do just as well without us; or we may wallow in the flabby emotions we mistake for religious ecstasy, and drug our souls with church music and flowers and altar-cloths and the mellifluous voices of curates; but whatever we do, the realities of life are always out of our reach. You men are like Napoleon's soldiers—each of you carries a field-marshal's *bâton* in his knapsack. We only carry a distaff; and if we are not content to sit by the fire and spin till the end of our days, so much the worse for us.'

Maystone experienced a feeling of the most intense satisfaction as he listened to this fervent speech. Here at last was a fellow-rebel. Up till now he had felt like a defenceless stranger in a hostile camp, but he seemed to have lighted upon a possible ally. He gazed with admiration at Miss Stour's face, on which a faint flush was slowly ebbing away, while her eyes flashed with intense feeling. What an Egeria she would make! what a mate for a popular leader! His ideas were moving rather fast.

They fell easily into a conversation of deep import on the aims of life and the pursuit of the ideal. Some of it was rather vague, but their emotions were stirred even when their brains were slightly fogged. Gradually Maystone unfolded to her his creed, his passionate desire to straighten some of the crooked things in this world, to remove a few of the injustices and inequalities of life. Miss Stour was much interested, and extremely encouraging. Apparently she shared his views to a great extent; she was sure she was a Socialist, though she appeared to be a little uncertain as to what Socialism actually represented; but she believed it to be the cause of the outcast and oppressed, and that was quite enough for her. At any rate, she seemed prepared to overthrow anything and everything that was already established, without compunction. She shared his contempt for

the lives that were passed in idleness and pleasure, and agreed with him that the soul could only satisfy its aspirations by constant striving after the light. They discussed poetry, and found a wonderful harmony of taste. Pictures, novels, music, all seemed to bind them closer together. It was true that their knowledge of these subjects was not absolutely profound. But as each fortunately knew something which the other did not, both were able to create an impression of considerable learning and cultivation. It was a slight shock to Maystone to find that Miss Stour did not share his interest in political economy. But as he was obliged to confess to a similar ignorance of Wagner's operas, the advantage did not remain with him long, and honours were divided.

Thus did these young people discourse till dinner was over; and Maystone, as it were, woke up with a shock, to find that Lady Seathwaite was gazing down the table with an eye that telegraphed a signal of departure to Lady Challacombe, who could not be induced to see it till Lord Seathwaite called her attention to the fact.

'It strikes me that I have been extremely confidential to-night,' said Miss Stour, as she prepared to rise from her chair. 'I don't think I ought to have shown such trust in one I never saw before.'

'You have given me a very pleasant and rare experience,' replied Maystone; 'please don't regret it.'

'I won't,' she said, 'for I also am grateful for the same. Would you please pick up my fan? There it is, close to my foot. Thanks.' And she swept away towards the door, while Maystone extricated himself from under the table with a throbbing heart and a whirling brain; whether due to the posture of stooping or to mental emotion he did not feel quite sure.

The departure of the ladies left him with a renewed



feeling of nervousness and isolation as he glanced round the disordered table. Except Rafford, there was not a man there whom he had ever seen before, and in this assembly of well-groomed, self-possessed men of the world he revived the sensations of a new boy at school. He made a diffident attempt to enter into conversation with Presterley, a pale, sullen-looking man with thin fair hair, a bald forehead, and hard, stupid blue eyes; but as that person merely replied in monosyllables, uttered with a deliberation that was almost insolent, he gave up the attempt. He was more successful when he turned to Woolton, who proceeded to expatiate on the good points in Miss Tintern's appearance, very much as if she had been a horse. Maystone, whose ideas of women were romantic, was slightly shocked; but as he discovered that the intention was solely complimentary, he expressed his agreement.

'To tell you the truth, I'm surprised to meet any one here with so much go in them,' said Woolton, with the genial expansiveness begotten of much champagne. 'Between you and me, it's a devilish dull house. Seathwaite is one of the best fellows in the world, but he always has been a steady-going sort of chap,—and as to my lady, she ought to be put in the cellar to keep the wine cool. However, they seem to have been importing some new blood into the pack, so perhaps we shall have a little more fun than usual. We must do our best to keep them alive.'

In pursuance of this resolve, he proceeded to make sport of Mr. Walter Flaire across the table, till that gentleman's amiability was almost exhausted, and Lord Seathwaite was obliged to rescue him by a somewhat hastened suggestion of joining the ladies.

## CHAPTER III

### LADY MARIA MELLINS

LADY MARIA MELLINS was one of the connecting links between the old order and the new. She was the daughter of an ancient house, and had married a rich brewer of uncertain extraction. It had been rather a bitter effort for her father, a penniless Irish earl of the old fighting, hard-drinking type, to accept such a son-in-law with equanimity. But as Mr. Mellins had really been a very presentable person, the impecunious nobleman's scruples had been overcome and the alliance permitted. Of course, it will be realised that these events took place a very considerable time ago.

The marriage had not been unsuccessful as such things are judged. Lady Maria had been a tolerably good wife in practice, whatever may have been her theory of their relationship, and he had found in her all that he had a right to expect. She was good-looking and popular, abounding in Irish high spirits; though this latter point was not altogether an advantage in his eyes, as he was a staid, solemn man, and rather resented her frivolity, which was not compatible with his middle-class notions of dignity and seemliness. Further, she had a habit of forming jovial friendships with good-looking young men, and the worthy Mellins was jealous. Indeed, her conduct was more than once so decidedly indiscreet, that she was looked at askance

by many of the more carefully starched ladies of society. There is strong reason to suppose that she never overstepped the limits of actual misconduct fixed by an illogical world, whose degrees of guilt are an endless wonder and delight. But she succeeded in irritating her husband to an extent which the good brewer could never forget. And consequently, on his death, Lady Maria found herself left with a moderate life annuity, which she would lose if she married again, while the bulk of Mr. Mellins' fortune passed to a distant relative, a stout person from Streatham, who called her 'Lady Mellins.'

Lady Seathwaite, who came of a family of rigid demeanour, had been brought up to regard Lady Maria with disfavour, and her natural inclinations had increased the implanted prejudice. As Lady Maria was an old friend of Lord Seathwaite's family, this had led to difficulties, which had been solved by her dropping out of the circle of visitors to Sandleford for many years. When Gladys Stour's mother died, and Lady Maria took upon herself to supply in a limited fashion the maternal place, the indignation of Lady Seathwaite and others of the family was deep and strongly expressed, though none of them would have willingly burdened themselves with the charge of the orphan. But when Gladys grew up, Lady Seathwaite, who was very loyal to any one with whom she had the smallest tie of blood—especially if they were popular and successful—showed considerable interest in the girl, and frequently invited her to Sandleford, though this was the first occasion on which she had been able to bring herself to ask Miss Stour's self-constituted *chaperon*.

Lady Maria was tall and rather grim to behold, except that she always looked the least bit drunk. I hasten to add that the appearance had no foundation in fact. She had a long, hooked nose and a curious droop in the lid

of her left eye, exaggerated by the fact that she wore a single eyeglass always in front of it. Her voice was deep, but a sing-song intonation robbed it of all impressiveness; indeed, her manner of talking verged on the absurd, and formed some sort of covering in consequence for the extremely naked remarks to which she occasionally gave utterance.

When the men arrived from the dining-room, she got up from her chair beside Lady Seathwaite and beckoned to Charlie Rafford.

'Take me away into a corner, Charlie,' she said, as he approached; 'I haven't seen you for ages, and I want to talk to you. Fancy our meeting under this roof!' she went on, as they moved away towards the end of the long gallery in which the party was assembled. 'You told me you didn't mean to come here again, and certainly I never expected to be admitted to these sacred precincts. I felt rather inclined to refuse, but I didn't like to hurt poor Seathwaite, and it was a great temptation to come and see something of him again. And besides, I'm fond of this place. I have many associations with it in the old days; and when you get to my time of life, you'll find it's worth putting up with a good deal to awaken pleasant memories. Not that Laura hasn't been as sweet as honey so far, but still she don't like me, and I don't like her, and there's no getting over that. But it does one good to see Seathwaite again, though he's turning dreadfully grey, poor boy. I suppose he has been married to an iceberg so long that the frost has got into his hair.'

Rafford looked at her with the faint, slightly ironical smile which was so often on his mouth, though he had the same serious eyes as his brother.

'White heads are flowers that grow pretty thick in the matrimonial hothouse,' he said; 'how can you be always

advising me to get married when you see the effect it has?’

‘It isn’t fair to judge of a system only by its failures,’ she answered; ‘you know as well as I do that it would be much better for you if you had some one to think of as well as yourself. Aren’t you getting sick of the aimless life you lead? What is going to be the end of it?’

‘A bad one, I daresay,’ he replied; ‘most things do and badly if you only follow them far enough. But even admitting you are right, whom shall I marry? Will you find me an attractive heiress?’

‘No, that I won’t. You ought to marry a poor woman, and have to work and struggle and learn to shake yourself out of your careless, lounging life. There’s a lot of good stuff in you, Charlie, and you’re letting it run to seed. It’s no good my preaching, for you only laugh at me, but I’m fond of you, and I should like to see you happy, my dear boy. I don’t think you are now, and I don’t think you’re on the way to be.’

She looked at him with a curiously soft expression on her quaint face. There was something about Rafford which attracted most women, young or old. It was true that Lady Maria was very fond of him. He inspired her with the strange attachment, half motherly, half romantic, which comes so often to colour the sad tints of the late autumn of a woman’s life.

Rafford did not answer, but gazed at the carpet thoughtfully, his fingers playing with his black moustache. A burst of merriment further down the room distracted their attention from the subject of their conversation. Miss Tintern and Woolton had organised a lively party who were playing childish games of cards round a large table.

‘You’re old maid, Miss Stour,’ cried Miss Tintern amidst shouts of laughter; ‘why didn’t you take the other card? Sir Thomas was doomed to celibacy if you had.’

'My last chance of a quiet life gone!' said Woolton ruefully, while Miss Stour waved a card above her head in triumph. Her white arm emerged from the soft gossamer-like tissue of her dress, and a faint tinge of delicate colour appeared in her pale cheek. There was something, for the moment, fragile and diaphanous about her beauty. She looked almost like a fair-haired sprite with laughing eyes.

Rafford watched her in silence, and then turned to Lady Maria with a smile.

'I don't think that game is likely to be prophetic,' he said.

'She is very pretty,' Lady Maria answered; 'it is an unusual type of beauty, and in some ways she is an unusual type of girl. Of course, all that she thinks most original in herself is the part that she shares with most girls of her age. They are all full of restlessness and dissatisfaction, and burning to find more in life than they can ever put into it, and they all think that no one else ever felt the same, and that every one but themselves finds the path quite smooth and easy. A girl's soul is much too big for her body at that age. We were just the same when we were twenty-two. I don't mean that I was ever like her in looks—I wish I had been, though I wasn't a bad-looking girl for all I'm an ugly old woman now. But Gladys has got something more in her than all that steam, which will evaporate in time, and if circumstances aren't too much for her she'll be a remarkable woman. Now, Charlie, there's a wife for you. She'd bring out the best in you if any one could. And I believe you might bring out the best in her. Oh, I know your faults. But you aren't as selfish as you think; and if you haven't been a model of all the virtues up to now, very likely you'd settle down none the worse for it. I daresay I'm a match-making old woman, but

there aren't many things I'd sooner see than that. What do you say?'

'Shall I go and ask her at once?'

'Don't be ridiculous. I'm quite serious. Why shouldn't you marry her?'

'Well, it's a little bit abrupt, isn't it? You see, the young lady may have other designs for herself. I am given to understand that her relations have.'

Lady Maria glanced in the direction of Presterley, who was sitting at the card-table with an expression of intense boredom on his rather sullen face.

'You mean *that*?' she said.

'Yes, I mean *that*. It looks as if it found playing cards for love rather slow work, doesn't it?'

'Charlie, I'll tell you the truth. It's *that* that I want to save Gladys from.'

'And you think that even *I* would be preferable. You're not a very efficient guardian of youth. Presterley is a rich man, and I——'

'Oh, I know,' said Lady Maria, wagging her head piteously; 'I believe I ought to encourage it. I'm certain he wants to marry her.'

'And she——?'

'How can one tell what line a girl will take? She's poor and ambitious and rather reckless. She has never been in love, and doesn't believe that she ever will be. It's a good chance for her, no doubt. And then there are plenty of people to encourage her. Laura is quite keen about it.'

Rafford meditated that in this last fact might possibly lie the explanation of Lady Maria's opposition. He had always regarded her as an embodiment of worldliness, and could hardly believe in the sincerity of her present romantic mood.

'They are probably right,' he said; 'do you think it is wise to try to prevent it?'

'I can't do anything, one way or the other,' said Lady Maria in helpless tones; 'Gladys will go her own way; she always does. But I do hate the idea of it. All these pious people think nothing of handing a girl over, body and soul, to the first man that can afford to pay for her. My God, Charlie!' she exclaimed passionately, 'if they had had my experience of life, they would think differently!'

Rafford said nothing. He was getting a new insight into Lady Maria's soul; and when he thought of the light in which he was accustomed to regard her, he felt rather ashamed.

After a moment she laughed nervously.

'I'm afraid I'm growing sentimental,' she said; 'I don't think I had better talk to you any more now—you're having a bad effect on me. Go and bring that young Maystone to talk to me. Gladys tells me he is very interesting, and I want to judge for myself. They seem to have exchanged transcendental ideas to their mutual satisfaction. She says he is a violent Radical, and revolutionary, and all sorts of nice youthful things, which inspired her with great interest. There, they've just finished their game. Go and fetch him.'

Miss Tintern, weary of the innocuous excitement of gambling for counters, had demanded a feather and a sheet. In spite of his wife's disapproving eyes, Lord Seathwaite, who was enjoying himself greatly in these juvenile sports, had cordially acquiesced, and had sent for them, greatly to the astonishment of the dignified footman, unused to such demands at Sandleford. When they arrived, Miss Tintern, having taken undisputed command of the party, commanded them to sit in a ring on the floor, holding up the sheet, across which they blew the feather backwards and forwards,



while Woolton careered wildly round the circle, endeavouring to catch it.

Lady Seathwaite looked on in silence. It did not seem to her at all a nice game. She wondered what that extraordinary girl would lead them on to next ; she was capable of suggesting anything. And fat, good-natured Lady Challacombe had actually plumped down on the floor and tucked her voluminous skirt under the sheet !

Nigel Maystone also regarded this new departure without satisfaction. Life was so short, and there were so many more serious interests in it than you could possibly exhaust in the time, that it seemed pure waste to expend any of it on this sort of folly. Why couldn't they dance, or play billiards, or, better still, have some sensible conversation ?

He was perhaps in some danger of becoming a prig.

His discontent was not lessened by the fact that Miss Stour was joining in the game with the greatest zest, laughing as heartily as any one. And Presterley, who had stuck to her like a leech ever since dinner, was sitting now so close to her that they were touching. He seldom spoke, and scarcely ever smiled, but the dogged pertinacity with which he paid attention to her was most evident.

Maystone was obliged to confess to himself that the kindly good-humour of the party was already making him feel much at home. His nervousness had almost departed, and the hostility which his principles compelled him to feel for these butterflies could only be kept awake with an effort. Miss Tintern had just summoned him with friendly authority to take his share in the game, when Rafford dispelled his hesitation by carrying him off to be introduced to Lady Maria. He seated himself beside her, whilst Rafford joined the noisy feather-hunters amidst a chorus of welcoming approval.

Lady Maria examined him through her eyeglass.

'I hear you are a violent Radical,' she said abruptly.

'Yes,' he answered. 'But please don't tell me that it's a sign of extreme youth, and that I shall grow out of it.'

As this was exactly what Lady Maria had intended to tell him, she was slightly taken aback. She grunted, and stared at him again with some curiosity. She was not at all displeased by the boldness of his speech.

'You think it will last,' she said; 'but it won't. Nothing lasts. Life's always going up and down, like that horrible switchback they have at the Exhibitions now. They took me on it once, and I thought I should have been sick; the pleasures of crossing the Channel brought to your own door, so to speak. But how do you occupy yourself while you are waiting for the revolution? What's your profession?'

'I haven't one at present.'

'Then I suppose you are a rich man. And yet you are a Socialist! That don't seem consistent. Why don't you sell all that you have and give it to the poor?'

'I am not rich. On the contrary, I have nothing to give the poor except my life's work, and I hope to give them that.' Maystone was not altogether pleased at being catechised in this way. Lady Maria seemed to speak to him as if he were a silly little boy, and the annoying part was that he felt rather like one.

'And what is your life's work going to be, when you come down to facts?'

This was rather a trying question, for Maystone never had quite come down to facts. He answered lamely, 'Oh, I want to write and lecture and that sort of thing. But there are difficulties. My father doesn't see the matter quite as I do.'

'He wants you to go into the City?' said Lady Maria.

'Yes. A stockbroker's office,' he replied scornfully. 'But how did you know?'

'Oh, intuition. It's a way fathers have got. They give to commerce what was meant for mankind—perhaps for womankind.'

'That isn't fair,' he said; 'it isn't only vanity that makes me think as I do.'

'Of course not,' she answered heartily; 'but still one thing helps another. Miss Stour tells me that you are a most interesting young man.'

Maystone laughed rather nervously, and hoped that he was not going to blush, which he felt inclined to do. Fortunately, they were in a dark corner.

After this their conversation centred round Miss Stour for a considerable time. The truth was that Lady Maria, in a blind confused sort of way, was feeling helplessly about for any one who would save her *protégée* from the clutches of the undesirable Presterley. Her sentiments were due partly to a spirit of opposition concerning Lady Seathwaite, partly to a strong personal dislike to Presterley himself, whose taciturn, ungracious demeanour was the reverse of attractive to such a lover of cheerfulness. But the strongest motive was undoubtedly her sincere love for Gladys Stour. During the course of her later life Lady Maria had always maintained most strongly the worldly view of matrimony. She had poured unlimited scorn on all romantic notions, and had truthfully asserted that such ideas had not been admitted into her own acceptance of the holy estate—in which boast she had perhaps resembled the fox in a certain fable of Æsop's. But now, when the application of her principles was coming so near home, she had been seized with an unreasoning horror of any cold-blooded arrangement, and shrank in dismay from the possibility of seeing Gladys tied to a man for whom she was without affection or sympathy.

How to prevent this was a matter beyond the grasp of

her bewildered brain. She could form no definite plan, and her only resource was to pelt the girl with unobjectionable young men, gathered from every available quarter,—much as you would throw bones to a dog in the hope that some singularly appetising morsel might chance to divert him from a contemplated raid on the sideboard. She did not indeed anticipate their playing the part of young Lochinvar, or supplanting the objectionable bridegroom at the altar. But she hoped that they might stand between Gladys and destruction until some more desirable solution of the problem should appear. It is true that in the case of Rafford her affection for him had overcome her prudence, and she would really have done anything in her power to bring about an alliance between him and Miss Stour. But Maystone, or any one else in whom Gladys might feel a passing interest, was simply to be used as a counter in the game. How it might affect them was their affair.

Maystone found the topic most interesting. All sorts of vague ideas were floating in his mind. He had never felt the spell of female charm so strongly before he met this fair girl, and he applied himself with eagerness to learn all that he could of her habits, character, and tastes. The picture that Lady Maria painted for him fired his imagination the more. All other dreams and ambitions faded into the background, and Miss Stour began to take a prominent place in his mental panorama.

‘Well,’ said Lady Maria at last, ‘if you follow your father’s advice and come to London, I hope you will look us up. We shall always be glad to see you.’

The prospect enchanted him. He began to take an entirely new view of his obligations. After all, he had no right to expect his father to support him. It was a duty to earn his living. And even if he had to go to the City in the daytime, he would have his evenings to devote to

the cause of humanity—not excepting the more particular application to the female branch of the species.

‘I think it is very likely that I shall go,’ he said; ‘I quite agree with you that one must take a common-sense view of life; I daresay I shouldn’t hate the City so much as I think.’

‘Much better to go there,’ she answered; ‘very likely you’ll make a large fortune.’

‘Oh, I hope not!’ he exclaimed, with such genuine horror that she stared at him in blank astonishment; ‘I hope I may escape the disgrace of becoming a capitalist.’

Lady Maria grunted and gasped. She had never met a young man who puzzled her so much. She must certainly make new opportunities of studying him.

At this moment Mr. Walter Flaire, engaged in the pursuit of the feather, overbalanced himself and fell headlong into the middle of the sheet with his legs on Lady Challacombe’s lap. This embarrassing event brought the game to an end amidst much confusion; and Lady Seathwaite, with a ruffled spirit, hastily called upon the ladies to come to bed. A faint pressure of the hand and a bright smile from Miss Stour set Maystone’s heart beating, though he was a little dashed when he saw an equally bright smile bestowed upon Rafford as he handed her a candle. She merely nodded to Presterley, who made no attempt to shake hands, but watched her, as she retreated upstairs, with a dogged, anxious look on his face.

For the next hour Maystone saw nothing but Miss Stour’s face shaping itself in the smoke-rings that curled from the bowl of his pipe; while Presterley beat Rafford at billiards, and the remaining men listened to a picturesque description from Woolton of a tiger-shooting expedition in India, in the course of which he had apparently met with some remarkable adventures, both sporting and amatory.

## CHAPTER IV

### MR. FLAIRE INVESTIGATES

OF all the party assembled at Sandleford, the one who took the most impersonal interest in his fellows was Walter Flaire. Having no particular characteristics beyond inquisitiveness and amiability, he was not ambitious of playing any important part upon the stage of life. His thoughts were solely occupied with the doings of the polished society in which it was an unfailing delight to him to find himself planted by Fate. Creeds might be shattered, political systems revolutionised, and nations torn asunder; art and science might flourish or die; but so long as he could find a scandal to investigate, a marriage to foretell, and a dowager to prime with gossip, he was content, and asked no more.

His observant eye followed the movements of his fellow-guests, while his mind strove to analyse their motives. In a country house a process of natural selection speedily sorts out the various affinities, and likes and dislikes develop at a pace unknown in London, where everything else moves so much more quickly. Before two days were over, it was clearly evident to Flaire that Woolton and Miss Tintern had discovered a field of mutual sympathy. They met in such a constant atmosphere of laughter, that he did not feel sure whether they would ever find time to fall seriously in love. But they certainly had the habit of

coming together on all possible occasions. Their conversation chiefly consisted of badinage, generally directed by one against the other, though from time to time they combined to point their shafts at some other member of the party—particularly at Flaire himself; and as he always liked being noticed, this gave him much satisfaction, and disposed him favourably towards them. They were not brilliantly witty; Woolton indeed was very much the reverse, and suffered terribly at the hands of his adversary when she chose to attack him, his powers of repartee being chiefly confined to a chuckle and an eyeglass. But they were full of high spirits and good-humour, and certainly helped to keep up an air of cheerfulness in the house.

‘What a bright, amusing girl Miss Tintern is!’ Flaire remarked to Lady Seathwaite gushingly. ‘She keeps us all alive.’

‘Does she? I do not find my vitality increased,’ Lady Seathwaite answered in her most chilly tones. Flaire, who would not have dreamed of differing from his hostess, hastened to modify the statement.

‘Perhaps her spirits *are* a little fatiguing,’ he remarked.

‘No doubt *she* finds them so,’ replied Lady Seathwaite. ‘Frivolity is an exhausting *pose* to keep up.’

‘Well, no doubt there is a slight ring of insincerity about her,’ he quickly admitted.

‘And also a lack of taste,’ pursued her ladyship.

‘Yes, she is shocking bad form,’ he responded desperately. Coming to bless, he had remained to curse, and felt like an inverted Balaam; though he was not sure if Lady Seathwaite was the angel or the ass.

He changed the subject and mentioned Miss Stour. From Lady Seathwaite’s remarks he gathered that this young lady was in much higher favour, and resolved to devote his attention to her for the rest of the visit. In-

deed, her position was so much more complicated, that he felt that she would well repay minute observation. At first he had imagined that she was merely drifting over the line with Presterley, and had looked forward to a commonplace engagement as the natural sequel. He had gathered from hints dropped by Lady Seathwaite—and he was quick at developing hints—that this was the end which was expected and desired. But Miss Stour's conduct was difficult to interpret. She appeared to shun Presterley, and devoted much attention to Nigel Maystone. As the latter was not a member of any 'smart' set, Flaire had barely noticed his existence at first, and had only begun to regard him as a human being, when he discovered with surprise that Miss Stour actually treated him as such. Maystone's admiration was most evident, and Miss Stour certainly seemed pleased with it. But Flaire's interpretation of the situation was hindered by the intrusion of another element in the shape of Charlie Rafford. Flaire reflected with pride that few people would have been keen-sighted enough to notice that Rafford was playing any part in the comedy. Indeed, he was puzzled to discover what that part was. But he was certain that this third power was at work on the girl, whether lightly or strongly he could not discover. Rafford seemed inclined to avoid her, and never spoke to her except in the bantering tone which he habitually used to most people. But whenever he was near her, Miss Stour appeared to Flaire to be under some disturbing influence. More than once he detected a faint flush on her cheek, and there seemed to be a curious, appealing look in her eyes as she glanced at Rafford once or twice when he was not looking. Rafford also gave him the impression of watching her with more interest than his occasional remarks seemed to indicate. Flaire knew something of Rafford's history. He was aware that women had found him attractive



before now. Indeed, quiet as he was, there was an indefinable suggestion of mastery about him sometimes, of which both sexes were dimly conscious. Was Miss Stour experiencing this? Flaire resolved to do his best to solve the problem.

In quest of lights on the matter, he approached Presterley, who was smoking by himself on the terrace, while Rafford and Maystone were conversing together some yards away. Flaire halted beside Presterley, leaned against the parapet of the terrace, and daintily lighted a cigarette. Presterley remained silent.

'Nice young fellow, that young Maystone,' said Flaire genially, looking towards the young man in question. He thought that Presterley might reveal something by his reply. Presterley knocked the ash off the end of his cigar, and then said in slow, drawling tones, without any sign of interest, 'Is he?'

'As far as I can judge, he seems pleasant,' said Flaire, careful not to commit himself to anything definite. 'Don't you agree with me?'

'I should call him a damned young ass,' answered Presterley, in the same deliberate manner.

'Really! Why?'

'Why not?'

'Well, I mean, how does he show his asinine propensities?' asked Flaire with an apologetic smile.

'If you don't know an ass when you see one, I can't help you,' said Presterley, and sauntered away towards the house. Flaire was of a forgiving disposition—especially towards the rich—but his temper was a little tried by this want of politeness. He sighed, and also retired indoors. But he felt that at any rate he had established the fact that Presterley was jealous of Maystone. Which indeed was more or less true.

Presterley was one of Fortune's practical jokes. He had succeeded as a boy to considerable wealth. Most of the multifold treasures of life had been within easy reach of his grasp; but he had been denied the power to perceive their value or the inclination to grasp them. Absolutely devoid of imagination or taste, he had just sufficient intelligence to steer himself through life without serious mishap, and sufficient discrimination to enable him to despise everything that he did not understand. Beyond the methodical gratification of his somewhat sluggish appetites, he had scarcely any natural impulses. Having been brought up in the country, and being physically fearless, he was an accomplished horseman; and if he could be said to have an intellectual emotion of any kind, it was a passion for hunting. His life had been a course of dull and sordid dissipation; not that his views were vicious, for he had none, but because it seemed a natural thing to him to gratify half consciously every animal craving.

Across his cloudy brain a gleam of light had slowly broken when he was brought into the presence of Gladys Stour. He had dimly realised an aspiration towards something purer and higher than the level on which he had hitherto lived. There was a germ of nebulous romance in his attitude towards her.

This did not prevent his pursuing her in a very practical spirit. He had never found much difficulty in obtaining anything that his limited tastes required hitherto. And having looked into the future sufficiently to make up his mind that he would marry Miss Stour and settle down, he proceeded to work for that object with a patient persistency that made light of rebuffs and admitted no possibility of doubt in his mind as to his ultimate success.

She certainly made him feel the burden of the yoke. She was capricious and self-willed, and he found it difficult

enough to satisfy her. But though she rather avoided his society and treated him with scant consideration at all times, she seemed to take care not to try him too far, and a doubt of the ultimate result never entered his mind. That which annoyed him most was her evident liking for Maystone. It was not so much that he was jealous, though he was so to some extent, but he regarded Maystone as a milksop and an ass, and it irritated him that Miss Stour should find anything interesting in such a feeble creature.

As Presterley's long figure slouched along the terrace, Rafford watched him with his peculiar smile.

'You had a bit of a row with that gentleman yesterday, hadn't you?' he said to Maystone.

'Not exactly a row,' said Maystone. 'I was talking to Miss Stour about the unemployed, and he overheard us, and said that they were a set of lazy ruffians, and that people who wouldn't work if they could deserved to starve. I asked him how he justified his own existence on that principle, and he lost his temper and was rather rude.'

Rafford regarded him with an air of benevolent amusement, rather like a mastiff looking at a pug.

'You're a nice firebrand, young man,' he said; 'I don't know how it is that you've managed to keep out of hot water so long in this house. Some of your opinions would give my sister-in-law a fit.'

'You don't quite understand. I'm not so bigoted that I can't see that other people have a right to their opinions, and it would be rather a churlish way of repaying hospitality to ride roughshod over them. And then I'm not such a revolutionary as you think. It is only the abuse of power that makes me angry; and when I see a man like your brother doing his duty honestly, and realise that his tenants are justly treated, and every one about him is made as happy as circumstances permit, I am silenced.'

'And how do you know all that? You haven't had much time for investigating.'

'Oh, Miss Stour told me, and I know I can trust her judgment.'

'Ah, of course. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," as some one says.'

Maystone blushed, and felt annoyed with himself for doing so. He hastened to explain.

'No, it really isn't that,' he declared; 'of course, I admire her very much—I don't see how any one could help doing so. But if she had been a plain man instead of a pretty girl, her judgment would have been worth a good deal. She may not have a very deep education, and she is light-hearted and fond of amusing herself, like other girls; but she has that great gift of sympathy which enables people to see truths that are hidden from some of those who think themselves the wisest.'

'I don't know which to admire most—your sentiments or your language,' remarked Rafford flippantly.

'Are you *ever* serious about *anything*?' Maystone asked.

Rafford looked at him with a curious wistful look in his eyes.

'Youth is rather attractive,' he said. 'I'm not sure that I wouldn't give a good deal to be as much in earnest about things as you are. And yet, I don't know. There's a lot to pay for the privilege.' Then he burst out laughing, and said, 'Will you come fishing this afternoon? The water is in splendid condition.'

'I should like to immensely, but I haven't got a rod.'

'Oh, I can lend you everything.'

'Thanks. You are a good chap,' said Maystone simply.

'I am enjoying my visit here immensely, and it is a great deal owing to you.'

Then he walked away, leaving Rafford somewhat astonished.

‘Funny, warm-hearted, unconventional beggar,’ Rafford muttered to himself. ‘What the deuce has he got to be grateful to me for? I have only been decently civil to him. Did he expect us all to eat him on toast?’

Rafford’s view of life was a little hard. He had schooled himself to look on almost all sentiment with something akin to contempt; and though his natural gifts of imagination and sensibility occasionally cast a softening light over his mind, he struggled to throw off the influence with a school-boy sense of ludicrous shame. He had begun life in a somewhat different spirit. But this rough world had rubbed some sore places in the skin of his heart, and when they were healed he had shrunk from the danger of reopening them. Nevertheless, he was conscious of an inexplicably warm feeling towards this shy, awkward, enthusiastic young man whom Fate had thrown across his path. Though he had a large acquaintance, and was, on the whole, a popular man, he had few, if any, intimate friends; and though his proud and rather scornful nature preferred this atmosphere of solitude, the faint voices of half-forgotten instincts occasionally cried within him for the closer companionship which he had taught himself to regard as almost a weakness.

He watched Maystone disappear with a struggle in his mind between affection and manufactured self-contempt. As an offering to the unnatural spirit which he strove to summon, he pondered laughingly on Maystone’s remarks on Miss Stour, and reflected on the young man’s evident liking for her with the insincere mockery of one who wishes to believe that he has passed beyond such things. But the effort was not altogether a success, and he turned to gaze across the park at the dark woods, already turning a pale brown-green with the growth of spring, and watched the pairing wood-pigeons as they sailed over the budding trees, with a dreamy look in his eyes.

'In the spring a young man's fancy——' he began to murmur, and stopped with a laugh. It certainly did seem ridiculous that one soft-faced girl should occupy a considerable portion of the thoughts of three men out of a single small party. For Rafford could not disguise from himself the fact that he also had been thinking about her a good deal. The record of his life was a somewhat stormy history of relations with women of varying degrees of intensity; which, if they had never quite touched the lowest level, had frequently been far from the highest. No one had ever quite possessed the whole of his heart, though one or two had captured an important share of it for a time. Now, there was little likelihood of his falling in love in the accepted and domestic sense of the term. But there seemed to be an originality about Miss Stour, a suggestion of fervour and life and spontaneity, which, combined with her beauty, assailed his weak points from several sides.

However, he had no intention of weaving any undesirable complications, which might make an idle hour fruitful of future inconvenience to both himself and her; nor did he wish to endanger the lately signed truce with his sister-in-law by taking any course obviously contrary to her wishes. So he mentally tossed Miss Stour to Presterley with a faint shrug of pitying regret, and turned his mind to the assortment of fishing-tackle and the choice of flies.

## CHAPTER V

### MISS STOUR LOOKS FOR SOLITUDE

It had been arranged that Woolton, Presterley, Miss Tintern, and Miss Stour should go for a ride together. Woolton and Miss Tintern had settled the matter for themselves. For the other two the suggestion had gone forth from Lady Seathwaite with such insistence that Miss Stour had been unable to decline, though she appeared disposed to do so.

As the party was to break up the next day, Lady Seathwaite had felt that it was time for matters to progress a little. Presterley had hardly been alone with Gladys since they came to the house, and this would be an opportunity, for the other couple was not likely to be obtrusive.

The rest of the party had scattered, on various purposes bent, and the four horses were waiting at the front door. Presterley and Woolton appeared upon the doorstep, and Miss Tintern arrived immediately afterwards, but there were no signs of Miss Stour. Woolton helped Miss Tintern to mount, and she sat, looking very fresh and graceful, on an impatient animal that pounded the gravel with its hoof and tossed its head till the steel jingled.

'I hope she won't be very long,' she remarked anxiously; 'we shall waste the whole afternoon, and my arms will be two inches longer if I have to hold this animal back much more.'

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'I'll tell you what,' said Woolton, 'why shouldn't we start, and Presterley can bring Miss Stour after us. They'll soon catch us up,' he added hypocritically.

Miss Tintern hailed the suggestion with approval, and Presterley growled an indifferent acquiescence. Woolton mounted, and the pair went down the gravel drive and out into the park with much clattering of hoofs and tossing of manes.

'But you never told them which way we were going,' said Miss Tintern suddenly.

'Didn't I? How unfortunate!' Woolton replied with a chuckle. Then Miss Tintern laughed too, and they put their horses into a canter and went sweeping away across the grass, till they disappeared amongst the trees.

Presterley got on to his horse, and sat flicking his whip and gazing through the open door. At last he heard a light footstep, and Miss Stour appeared. But, to his surprise, she was still dressed in the neat cloth dress which she had been wearing all the morning, and not in a riding-habit. She came down the broad steps and stood gazing at him with a whimsical expression on her upturned face. Her fair hair looked very soft and silky, and her delicate skin seemed less pale than usual in contrast with the white collar and tie which she wore, whose false masculinity only made more apparent the feminine daintiness of her features. Her soft tweed dress clung tight to her shapely figure. At the moment she looked like a pretty toy, for the wide doorway and flight of steps seemed to dwarf her proportions, and the pointed patent-leather shoes that peeped from under her skirt might also have belonged to a doll.

Presterley gazed at her with a doglike look of devotion in his eyes that was quite pathetic. Her appearance seemed to mesmerise him.

'I do hope you won't be angry,' she said, with a smile in



which friendly mockery blended with contrition ; 'but the fact is I have got some letters I *must* finish before the post goes, and I am afraid I can't possibly ride this afternoon. Where are the others?'

'They have gone on,' said Presterley slowly, unable to grasp for a moment the keen sense of disappointment which was flooding his brain. 'Don't you think you had better come?' he asked, with a softness that surprised her ; 'surely the letters can wait?'

She hesitated, touched by his tone in spite of herself. But the vague repulsion which his presence caused her quickly returned, and her resolution with it. 'No,' she said, assuming a tone of gaiety, 'all sorts of most dreadfully important affairs are trembling in the balance. I am going to tie a wet towel round my head and think till I can't see. You really must go without me this time.'

'Very well,' he said shortly, gathering up his reins. He turned his horse's head and rode slowly away, with the usual lifeless, rather sullen, expression on his face. But from the way the muscles of his jaw stood out, it was clear that his teeth were hard set.

Gladys Stour watched him for a minute, and seemed on the point of calling to him. However, she only requested the groom to take back to the stables the horse which had been brought for her, and then turned and made her way slowly to her own room.

'I wonder if I was a brute as well as a fool,' she thought. 'I am sorry if he minded. But I couldn't have endured him alone. I don't feel up to it now.'

The importance of the girl's correspondence had been exaggerated to an extent which almost amounted to falsehood. It is true that a half-finished letter lay on the open blotting-book, and that she took up a pen and sat down at the writing-table as if with the intention of finishing it.

But after a moment she laid the pen down again, and, leaning her chin upon the backs of her folded hands, she stared out of the open window.

It was a soft, cloudy day, with a moist west wind blowing gently after a week of showers; a day to make the spring grass grow so quickly that you might almost hear it, and to open apace the half-unfolded leaves whose vivid green made the old horse-chestnuts on the lawn look so new and lovely. Nearer the house a squirrel scrambled and rattled on the tapering branches of a large, grey-stemmed beech, whose brown, pointed buds were still almost tightly sealed. Ivy leaves flapped against the framework of the window, and behind them came the chattering chirp of sparrows whose nests were hidden in the dark green mass. Thrushes were pouring out floods of liquid song from every other tree, and once or twice Gladys could hear far away the faint call of the first cuckoo.

Gladys pressed her soft, warm chin down upon her knuckles. All the blood in her body seemed surging and singing. The pride of life, the passionate, half-conscious yearning for some answer to all the questions, some complete satisfaction of all the cravings, the thirst for beauty, the cry for sympathy, the aching hunger for happiness, were strong within her. Her senses seemed to be filling her brain with a species of intoxication.

She thought of Presterley with a shudder, and wondered vaguely why he had suddenly become so repulsive to her. She had rather liked him a short time ago; it had touched and pleased her to see how much he was softened by her presence, and her pity had gone out to the gloomy, taciturn man, whom people regarded with contempt as a dullard and a clown. She really believed that if he had asked her to marry him a week or two ago, she would have accepted him. One must marry some one, and he could give her

abundance of good things, and would probably be tame and docile, even if he were a little dull. It would have meant liberty and power such as were altogether denied her at present. And such things made most of the difference in life.

In the mature experience of twenty-two years, Gladys had decided that the thing which she had most anxiously hoped to meet had missed her and gone another way—the absolute self-surrender, the absorption, of an intense passion. She reasoned that if she had not found it in four years, she was not likely to find it in fifty. Existence without the hope of it was terribly shallow, but had some good things on the surface still. She was reckless and impatient, and eager to have a life rich and high-coloured. If Presterley had been less deliberate, he might have captured her before this. But now?

A change had come, though she would not confess it to herself.

She took up the pen and tried to finish her letter. But her thoughts wandered, playing with a mental toy in the shape of a man; a tall, dark man, rather silent, rather stern of feature, whose smile seemed to mock her, and who had shunned her with apparent deliberation. She tried to sign the letter, and found that she had written another name instead of her own.

Springing to her feet, she tore the paper into strips. Far away, out of the window, she saw a solitary horseman ascending the hill on the other side of the park. The spectacle decided her movements, and she hastily put on her jacket, and settled her hat upon her fair curls, laughing at her own reflection in the glass with scornful defiance, as she transfixed the unoffending hat savagely with an enormous pin. She put on her boots, which she had almost forgotten, with a vehemence that tried the strength

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of the laces rather highly. Then she stumped out on to the landing, slamming her door behind her, and made as much noise going downstairs as a little person with small feet could.

In the hall she ran against Lord Seathwaite, who was taking his hat off a peg with his usual air of gentle melancholy.

‘Hullo,’ he said, ‘all alone! How’s that?’

‘My great spirit panted for solitude,’ she said in a tone of mock tragedy, ‘so I shunned the walks of men—and the rides too.’

‘Won’t you bring your great spirit down to the farm with me?’ he asked, looking at her with his kind smile. ‘I should like a companion. And I can show you such a beautiful Jersey bull.’

She hesitated. There was something rather pathetic about him, and it seemed a shame to let him go alone. But she wanted badly to get away from every one for a little time, and accordingly she shook her head.

‘You must find another Europa,’ she said. ‘Bulls do not allure me to day.’

‘Very well,’ he said, smiling; ‘I don’t expect you would find pottering about a farm with a slow-going agriculturist like me very amusing work.’

She laid her hand impulsively on his sleeve.

‘Oh, Lord Seathwaite,’ she exclaimed, ‘how *horrid* you must think me! But it isn’t that I don’t want to go with you. I should love it another time. But just now there are at least six different devils trying to ride on my back at once, and I must go off into the park and run races with myself till I can shake them off. There, now, I’ve shocked you,’ she went on, looking contritely up at him.

‘Indeed you haven’t,’ he replied, gazing at her with puzzled eyes; ‘I believe I used to feel like that myself once. But it was some time ago.’

She gave a little laugh, and, with a nod of friendly farewell, ran down the steps and moved rapidly away from the house, leaving him to wonder what he had said that had amused her.

Out in the park a bit of a breeze brushed through her hair, and the rough grass felt springy under her feet. The rooks were busy building with much hoarse clamour, while a distant lark hung quivering and trilling against the cloudy sky. Amongst the oaks and beeches on the opposite hill she could see the deer moving, and once or twice a rabbit, disturbed in his investigation of the young fern-shoots, went bounding away before her with his ridiculous tail in the air. She walked on with a curious sensation, which she had often before experienced, of mingled physical exhilaration and mental depression.

Life, on the whole, had disappointed her so far. She had health and natural spirits, and a great capacity for enjoyment; she had always been discovering some new toy, with which she had set herself to play with delight; and it seemed as if there were a critical demon always sitting at the back of her brain who pulled her plaything to pieces directly she touched it.

She wandered about for an hour or more, keeping on the high ground of the ridge on which the house stood. The park spread over two sides of a valley, through the bottom of which the river ran, with a straggling line of alders and willows on its banks. She strayed for a while into the large wood which bounded nearly a whole side of the park, but the gloom and loneliness of it depressed her, and she soon came back, to gaze at the dusky red of the solid-looking gabled house as it showed through the scattered trees, and then at the dotted farms and fields, dark with wet grass or vivid with sprouting wheat, of the landscape beyond; and, further away still, the bare, wild moorland hills.

Presently she noticed a fisherman busy on the bank of the stream, and went down to investigate. As she drew nearer she recognised Nigel Maystone, and after a moment's pause she moved towards him.

Maystone was absorbed in the task of dropping his fly into a tempting eddy between the opposite bank and a sunken log, and under the drooping branch of a willow. It looked a likely place for a fish. But likely places are often deceptive in the matter of fish as well as of fortunes. He was rather proud of his own skill, as he twice most successfully covered the place with his cast ; but no fish responded to the invitation.

'Try about two yards higher up, just above the tree,' said a musical voice suddenly at his elbow ; 'I saw a fish rising there.'

Being a nervous man, he started violently, and turned with surprise to look at the neat grey figure and the dainty face, slightly flushed with exercise, from which the grey eyes looked out gaily under the waving fair curls clustered against the brim of a coquettish hat. She laughed merrily at his startled look, and he became confused with a wild combination of shyness, humility, and intense admiration.

'There, that's the place,' she said eagerly, as he sent his fly through the air with a swish of the line. 'Oh, you *stupid*—you're into the tree! No! Well done, that was a good cast. Ah!'

A splash and a bubbling tangle of eddying circles as the rod bent into a graceful arch and the rigid line rushed through the water. Gladys danced with excitement.

'Keep him away—keep him away from the tree!' she cried. 'There—mind that big stone! Hold him up! It isn't safe to let him stay in such a place, and you must risk something. Here, let me have the landing net! Now bring him this way! He's nearly done. That's it!'

She got the net under the exhausted trout, and with a visible effort of both hands lifted him out of the water, gasping and wriggling in the meshes.

'What a beauty!' she said. 'Poor thing! I feel quite a brute for having helped to catch it. Oh, don't let me see you kill it!'

She turned away and hid her eyes with her gloved hands, while Maystone settled the fish's life with a tap on the head.

'You have brought me luck,' he said; 'it is far the best I have caught to-day—nearly two pounds, I should think. How did you learn so much about fishing?'

'Oh, a nice little man taught me up in Scotland one year,' she answered. 'But I never do it now. I hate women who kill things.' Then she broke into the reckless, rather bitter laugh which always puzzled him so much.

'What humbugs we women must seem to you!' she said; 'we play at softness and gentleness, and can't even bear the sight of a fish being killed. And I don't believe we have any feeling at all, really. I expect there isn't a woman who doesn't love to see a human soul gasping in her landing-net. You men are clumsy and stupid and heavy-handed, and you're always hurting something without meaning to. But we do it on purpose, just to feel our power.'

'I shouldn't like to believe that,' he said gravely. He could not understand her changing moods, and wondered if she were really in earnest.

'Don't believe it,' she answered; 'it probably isn't true. And if it is, we have to pay pretty dear for the amusement. But we have to squeeze all our sensations into so short a space of time. For you there are always possibilities left as long as you are alive and well. But we have one little hour of sunshine, and then long years of hopeless, dreary twilight.'

She sat down on the bank, regardless of damp grass, and gazed at the water.

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'I am afraid you aren't happy,' said Maystone awkwardly; 'don't you think it is because you haven't got quite enough to do? I don't want to preach,' he went on, growing more nervous as he spoke, 'but it seems to me there is so much to be done in the world; and—well, you know, I daresay it sounds awful cant, but I do believe the best way of forgetting one's own troubles is to try to spend one's time curing other people's.'

'I suppose you'll tell me I'm morbid next,' she said, smiling up at him. 'You wise people, who are always telling us foolish ones to do things, generally call us that. It is quite true, I *am* morbid. But I didn't make myself so, and it isn't so easy to cure as you think.'

Maystone was distressed.

'You evidently think me an awful prig,' he said humbly, 'but I didn't mean to take a superior tone. I'm sure I find it all difficult enough too. I should be very glad to help you if I could.'

'I am sure you would,' she answered; 'but, unfortunately, you can't. Oh, look! there's a kingfisher. Isn't it lovely? I wish I could see it fishing. How it must hate you for poaching on its water! There, it has gone down the river to look for a quieter place, where there aren't any horrid humans!'

She had sprung to her feet, and was watching the bird with childish excitement.

'I'm afraid it will be disappointed,' he said; 'it will find Rafford a little further down.'

She started, and turned towards him abruptly. He was struck by the unusually bright colour which exercise had apparently painted on her cheek.

'Oh, is Mr. Rafford fishing too?' she asked, with laborious indifference.

'Yes, he's about a quarter of a mile further on. I wonder how he has been doing.'



'I'll ask him as I pass,' she said; 'I was going down the river. It is such a pretty walk!'

An impartial hearer might have been slightly amused by these explanatory remarks, but Maystone was hardly listening to them. He was overwhelmed with an aching, hungry feeling when he heard that she was going to leave him. The last few minutes seemed such a very golden time. He would have given a good deal to accompany her, but he had not the courage to suggest it.

In another minute the little grey figure was diminishing to a distant speck on the dark green; and Maystone, who would have liked to watch her out of sight, but did not venture to do so lest she should look round and notice it, was flogging the water with ferocity, seeing nothing but the gleam of her eyes in the flashing ripples, and hearing only the notes of her voice in the endless murmur of the stream.

He tried, with commendable common-sense, to restore the balance of his mind. He certainly did not put an exaggerated value on his own personal attractions. He realised that he was not good-looking; that he was shy, awkward, and poor; that his worldly prospects were very bad; and further, that he was inexperienced and young, and did not understand her. She belonged to a different world, and there was a vast gulf between them, which he never for a moment hoped to bridge. But his heart was crying to be near her, to serve her, to give her all that he had, and ask for nothing but a smile and a passing thought in return. From the want, perhaps, of a sense of humour, he compared her quite seriously to Miranda, and himself to Caliban.

His state of mind was one at which the world has agreed to laugh from time immemorial; possibly for fear that it might cry.

## CHAPTER VI

### PONS ASINORUM

GLADYS walked along the banks of the little river, watching the small black flies that danced over its surface, and listening dreamily to its eternal music. A thousand tones and semitones rang like fairy bells, now with shrill tinklings, now with a mellower clang, confused and mingled in the monotonous murmur. It seemed like some living creature hastening through the world and proclaiming aloud the different moods of its spirit, sometimes laughing joyfully, but more often wearily sighing or plaintively moaning, almost always in a state of hurry and turmoil and feverish excitement, but now and then sinking into comparative calm, as it glided smoothly round some bend, where the softer soil had made for it a deeper channel. Voices that harmonised with her own half-gay, half-melancholy thoughts seemed to ripple up to her from every stony shallow and sob to her from every darkened pool. Branches bowed and nodded perpetually as they dipped into the water. Here and there a water-hen hastened under some overhanging bush to avoid her, or a rat splashed from the bank and glided away noiselessly as her feet approached.

She indulged in some not very original reflections on the fact that all that we love flies from us, and all that we hate pursues us. This last point was driven home by a cloud of midges, into which she unwarily walked.

At length beyond the straggling willows she saw the grey stone bridge which carried the road leading to the house. The clouds had grown denser overhead, and the daylight was beginning to fade, bringing closer the different hues of the mossy sandstone and the browns and greens around. Rafford was bending over the parapet, on which lay his fly-book, and his light-coloured rod, balanced beside him, made a sharp line against the dark background. He looked a fine specimen of manhood in his rough, weather-beaten tweed suit, and even waders and big fishing brogues were unable to make his appearance altogether grotesque.

When she reached him he was tying a fly to his cast, and it was not till her step sounded on the pebbles of the road that he looked up and noticed her. It seemed to her that a faint shade of annoyance flitted across his brown face before he removed his pipe from his mouth and greeted her with a smile on his lips and a rather fierce scrutiny in his eyes. Gladys had felt an unaccountable sense of perturbation for the moment, but his look roused in her a feeling of defiance, and she walked up with a careless air and tried to seat herself negligently on the parapet of the bridge. But it was too high, and she slipped down again with a scramble that rather marred the effect of mingled self-possession and airiness which she was trying to keep up.

'Let me help you,' said Rafford. Before she could say anything, she found herself lifted up and planted on the stones, like a child. Then he bent over his tackle again, puffing silently at his pipe.

'Don't let me disturb you,' she said, with an effort at sarcasm, to soothe her slightly ruffled spirit.

'On the contrary,' he replied, 'your society would brighten a very much duller task than this. I wish these

March Browns of mine hadn't been put on such infernally thick gut.'

His real or affected indifference to her presence nettled her.

'I have just been helping Mr. Maystone to catch a magnificent fish,' she remarked.

'What luck some fellows have!' he said, looking at her with a smile of good-humoured amusement that maddened her.

'I think you are a very extraordinary person,' she said, in a tone that did not make the words sound like a compliment.

'Why?'

'Because, though I suppose most men look on women as fools, I don't think there are many who show it as plainly as you do,' she answered hotly. His mouth twitched into a smile, which he instantly suppressed, as he looked straight into her eyes with an expression of friendliness, so free from either surprise or resentment that her anger ebbed away into a sensation of shame at having made herself ridiculous. If he had shown any sign of contrition, she would have trampled on and then forgiven him. But as it was, she only had a disagreeably humiliating feeling that she had been rather silly, and that he had overlooked it.

She was accustomed to drive men like horses, but this one had put the bridle on her. She had known it from the first, but her self-respect demanded a little kicking; and now that it had proved futile, there was nothing for it but to submit. Submission was painful—and yet rather pleasant.

It seemed as though he had read her thoughts, for he made no reply to her remark, for which she was grateful to him. He dropped the line from his hand, and came across to where she sat, gazing silently down the stream.

His instincts told him that a sympathetic word would find in her a ready response. He had endeavoured to keep up a barrier between them; but it seemed as if the Fates had determined to break it down, and it was useless to resist any further. Under the shell of cynicism which he had built round his heart there was an ever-aching void. That void he never hoped to fill; least of all did he expect that this particular girl had the power to fill it. But the chance of soothing its pain only for a few minutes was a violent temptation.

He knew his own nature well, and he had made a tolerably good guess at hers. Idle flirtation was not much in their line. There was no half-way house for them between absolute indifference and deadly earnest. After all, they were to part to-morrow, and might never meet again. Why carry scrupulousness to the pitch of absurdity?

Rafford leaned over the parapet beside Gladys, still gazing at the water.

'Chance is a queer thing,' he said, finding the silence rather oppressive, and plunging at the first banal remark that came into his head. 'There's a cork that was probably grown in Portugal floating down stream alongside of a strip of fir-bark out of these woods. Why the deuce should they have been brought together across miles and years to bump each other for a few minutes, and then drift apart again for ever? There, the bark has stuck, and the cork is nearly out of sight already.'

Gladys turned to look, and her hand, as she shifted her position, touched his. The colour rushed to her face, and both hands were quickly withdrawn.

'It's the same game that Fate plays with human beings,' she said. 'Occasionally they both stick in the same place.'

'And then they soon get tired of bumping against each other, and wish the current would wash them apart again.'

'Do you really believe that nothing lasts in this world?' she asked, looking at him with timid, serious eyes.

'I don't stop to think much about it,' he said; 'the passing hour is enough for me. Looking forward is not so pleasant as looking back.'

'It depends on what you have left behind, and what you see in front.'

'Then are you still looking for El Dorado?'

'Please don't speak in that tone,' she pleaded; 'it isn't worthy of you to pretend to believe that all the beautiful dreams of life are ridiculous delusions, only fit for sensible people to laugh at. Goodness knows, we lose hope fast enough, and learn not to expect to see the promised land. But we know that it exists somewhere out there beyond the hills, if only we could reach it.'

'Do you think it does?' he asked, quite seriously. His face looked rather sad, and he turned it away as he spoke.

'I know it does. This hard, sham, artificial world is not our true home. We are kept out of our inheritance for a long time, but we may perhaps come into it before the end.'

'Women may,' he said. 'I think most men have sold their birthrights long ago.'

Their remarks were rather vague, but words are not of much importance in such conversations. There was a sense of intimacy between them, of confidences given and taken. A long pause ensued, during which their eyes avoided meeting.

But at length Rafford turned to her with a smile.

'I don't know that I am not rather foolish to let you take yourself and me so seriously,' he said. 'I expect it is much better never to look under another person's mask or to let him see under yours. One may see things that are hard to forget.'

‘But why should you want to forget?’ she asked.

‘Because most of the pain of life comes from remembering. We should be wiser now if we only talked of the weather.’

‘Oh no—no!’ she exclaimed, half stretching her hand towards him, and then drawing it back. Her lips were parted, and her eyes stared at him, wide and imploring. There was almost a break in her voice. ‘You are the first man I have known who understood,’ she said, almost in a whisper. Then she turned her face away again and looked at the river, with the colour coming and going on her cheek.

A horrible sense of the ridiculous suddenly seized upon Rafford. He hated himself for it, but he had a strong inclination to laugh. He felt inclined to retort that it was no wonder men did not understand such extremely abstract conversation. Nothing was further from his wishes than to pour scorn on the soft mood in her, which had partially awakened a kindred feeling in himself. But just as he was on the point of letting himself go in a flood of emotional thought, the touch of hardness in his nature sprang up and laid a restraining hand upon him.

‘Don’t be taken in about me,’ he said, smiling rather bitterly; ‘it’s very easy to make a woman take you at any valuation you like—though women don’t think so. A man soon finds their weak points with a little practice. And practice is not difficult to get, if you are a sufficiently contemptible brute to care to have it.’

The fierce scorn of his last words was evidently directed at himself, but it cut deeply into his hearer’s heart. She looked at him with trembling lips and eyes full of distress. He busied himself with relighting his pipe.

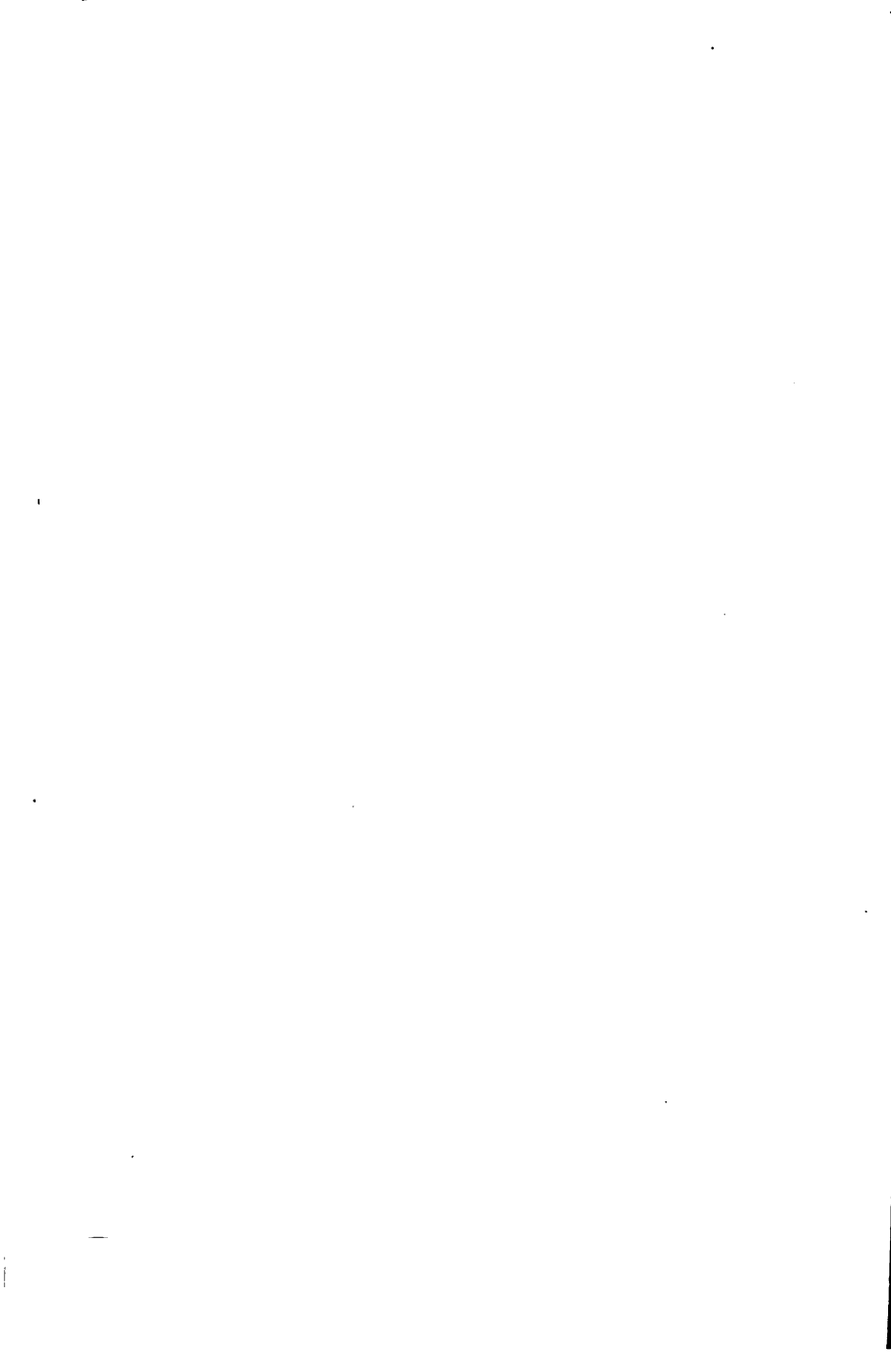
The dusk was gathering in the valley, and the tree-tops stood black against the grey sky. There was something

mournful in the gloomy silence. Faint smoke-wreaths curling over the distant house, and a few scattered rooks and pigeons, alone gave any sign of motion. The splash and babble of the river was almost the only sound to be heard.

The thunder of hoofs on the turf caused them both to look round. Presterley came galloping through the trees, and pulled his horse into a trot as he reached the road. He clattered up to the bridge and passed them without a word or a look. Before they had time to hail him he was on the turf again, galloping towards the house. As their eyes followed him, they fell upon another figure amongst the bushes on the bank, about fifty yards away. It was Maystone, who had just perceived them, and was watching them intently.

The combination was ludicrous. Rafford glanced at Gladys with an irrepressible smile on his mouth. He hardly knew what had amused him, and her mind was equally indefinite, but both had a not very agreeable feeling that the situation was comic. She laughed in a hesitating, uncertain way, and then slipped off the parapet, and began to walk towards the house in silence; while the two men stood and gazed after her, each in a mental condition that would have interested a student of psychology.





## BOOK II



## CHAPTER I

### COLONEL MAYSTONE

No one looking at Colonel Maystone would have been in doubt as to the profession he had followed. His erect bearing—unaffected by his considerable weight of flesh—his close-cropped hair and fierce white moustache, his dusky red face with its rough, wrinkled skin,—all combined to stamp the appearance of one who was unmistakably a soldier and a gentleman. His manners, though a little stiff, were not without geniality. His voice was rather loud, and his articulation abrupt and decisive. His temper was short, and he was wont to indulge in violent explosions of wrath, which, however, passed away quickly, though his pride would always require the hand of conciliation to be held out by the opposite party before the cause of dispute should be forgotten. He was a just master, a kindly neighbour, and a very honest, upright, God-fearing man. Most people liked him, and a few, chiefly his inferiors, loved him. He had won distinction in his profession by zeal and industry, and more than once by conspicuous gallantry in the field. He was in theory a firm upholder of all established authority, and disliked innovation of every kind. In the parish where he lived he had been at war with the vicar, the churchwardens, the overseer, and the doctor at various times. In every case he had been defeated, and had borne defeat with a generosity and dignity which had

won the lasting respect and esteem of his quondam opponents.

When he retired from the army he was a poor man, and he rented a small cottage in the outskirts of the village of Marchfont, in a Midland county. He was an ardent sportsman; and as he was here surrounded by the families which had been intimate with his own for generations, he had little difficulty in getting as much shooting and fishing as he wanted, and an occasional mount with the hounds. He was a prominent figure at all county festivities, and an influential force in local politics.

His wife had died at the birth of his second son Nigel. He had been a devoted husband, and mourned her loss with a sorrow which was the more intense for being proudly hidden from the world. His eldest son was a sickly boy, on whom he lavished a large share of the doting affection formerly given to his mother. The gods are jealous of such love; and some two years before the conclusion of Nigel Maystone's school life his brother died.

The blow for a time completely crushed the Colonel. Though he was too just and too high-minded a man to be remiss in his duties as a parent, he had never shown to Nigel any trace of the love which he had bestowed on his firstborn. It may be that he was unable to forget that Nigel's entrance into the world had robbed him of his adored wife. But there was something in their natures which was not altogether sympathetic, and there appeared to be always a faint shadow between them, which darkened as the years went on.

From time to time they seemed to be on the point of drawing nearer to each other, but only for a moment. Both had hot tempers, strong wills, and proud and stubborn natures. Nigel honestly tried to make concessions; the Colonel honestly tried not to ask too much; but though

they had arrived at a stage in which they seldom disputed and hardly ever quarrelled, their separate points of view were wider apart than ever.

Nigel saw clearly how his father regarded life. He differed totally from nearly all the views which the Colonel held; and though he tried hard to conceal the fact from himself as well as from his father, he regarded many of them with involuntary contempt.

Nigel's views, on the contrary, were an absolutely unknown quantity to the Colonel. Without much tangible evidence, he felt instinctively that they were not the same as his own, and despised them accordingly.

Yet there was a rough sort of affection between them, a tie of blood, stronger than they knew. Nigel kept away from home as much as he could. The separation was not painful to either of them. And yet they always met with a sensation of pleasure—a half-developed hope that now at last the barrier would be broken down, and that they would find in each other the companionship which they regretfully missed. But the hope soon faded away again. Their intercourse was politely restrained, not excessively cordial.

Nigel returned to Marchfont after his visit to Sandleford in a state of mind which was scarcely calculated to make a difficult position more easy. He had long been in revolt against society, now he was in revolt against himself. He had been seized with a wild craving for wealth and independence and idleness, a sense of repugnance for the petty dulness of his ordinary life. He wanted to get into the same world with Gladys Stour, to approach her without feeling, as he did now, as if she were a lovely vision on a gorgeous stage, and that the impassable footlights were between them. And his conscience smote him for the wish, calling back to him the creed, which he had held so firmly, of war against all this luxury and ease and costliness, which

set out so brilliantly the happiness of the few on the dark background of the want and suffering and hopelessness of the many. But when once passion begins to rise, conscience may go and hang himself.

It was a chill, damp evening when he arrived at home. There had been a drizzling fog all the afternoon ; and though the moisture was no longer falling in rain, it dripped from every thorn in the hedge, and twinkled in the light of the carriage-lamps on the grass, and hung in dismal folds along the dark lane and round the blurred cottages that loomed through the twilight. The porchless front door of the Colonel's little house stood back scarcely three yards from the road, and this fact seemed somehow to add to the dreariness. It partook of the worst ill attendant upon poverty—the want of privacy. None but the rich are allowed to keep their neighbours out of their secrets ; and *they* only earn the privilege at the cost of bitter envy.

He scrambled out of the dingy fly, and helped the driver to carry in his luggage, for the gardener had gone home, and the strength of the house-parlourmaid was not equal to the task. His father's voice hailed him carelessly through an open door, and the indifference of the salutation added to the gloom of his spirits. He merely echoed a reply through the doorway without entering the room, and, dragging his portmanteau up the narrow staircase, he dropped it with a dissatisfied thud on the floor of his bedroom, and sat down in a chair to think.

The thoughts that surged through his brain were dismal and bitter ; but through them, like a soft, pale light, gleamed the remembrance of Gladys Stour.

It was nearly dinner-time, and presently, having donned the old smoking-suit which passed for evening dress in this bachelor establishment, he went downstairs. He found the Colonel in a state of effervescence.

'Damn those School Boards and Education Acts and all the rest of their silly nonsense!' said the old gentleman fiercely. 'They take a fool, and cram his head so full of useless learning, that he can't exercise the very rudimentary thinking powers that Nature has vouchsafed to him. There's my new game-cockerel only arrived from the station this morning, and that idiot Bates puts it into the little wired-off run with the old cock, and, of course, there has been a fight, and the young one is half pulled to pieces.'

'Not seriously damaged, I hope?' said Nigel.

'Small thanks to that infernal ass if he isn't,' said the Colonel. 'Come along. Let's go and have dinner. Well, have you enjoyed yourself at Sandleford?'

'Very much,' said Nigel, with a feeling that he would prefer to talk of something else.

'Ah,' said his father, 'I've had some pleasant times in that house. The first time I went there was more than fifty years ago. It was in the old Lord Seathwaite's time—the grandfather of this present young fellow. I was only a little chap, but I remember it well.' And he proceeded with a monologue of reminiscence, which lasted till the soup had disappeared. Nigel did not listen to it, but occupied his mind with other reminiscences of a more recent date.

'Hullo,' said the Colonel, 'trout! I suppose you brought them with you. There's no mistaking those Sandleford trout. They're the best fish to catch and the best fish to eat I have ever come across. I suppose you spent most of the time fishing, didn't you?—except when you were making love to some young woman. I am sure Lady Seathwaite didn't forget to provide for *that*; though you're such a queer, solemn sort of chap, I dare say you didn't know how to take advantage of your opportunities.'

These remarks caused Nigel acute pain. To think of



Gladys Stour as a 'young woman' was distressing. She was something very different from mere humanity. Also he was disgusted with the notion of love-making as a sport, to be ranked with fishing. The spirit of devotion with which he was filled seemed to him to have a resemblance to the loftiest religious ecstasy. He endeavoured to change the subject.

'While I have been away,' he remarked, 'I have been thinking over my future plans.'

The Colonel's face grew more serious. It was a subject on which they had already gone through some tough contests.

'Indeed!' he said; 'and may I ask what you have decided to do? Are you going to live on your property and start a pack of hounds? Or perhaps, as your tastes are studious, you will prefer to take a house in Grosvenor Square and entertain the leading lights in the intellectual world.'

Nigel's hot temper began to sting him as he listened to this crude sarcasm. But he kept command of himself, and answered quietly—

'I have been thinking over what you have said about the vacancy in Prowse and Flatten's office; and if you are still willing to help me enough to enable me to live in London, I have decided to go there.'

Colonel Maystone's face beamed with jovial approval.

'Upon my word, Nigel,' he said, 'you've got more sense than I ever gave you credit for. I can't tell you how glad I am to hear of your decision. As you know, I can't afford to do very much for you, but I'll give you as much as I can spare, and with the small salary you'll start with you'll be able to get along. Of course, you'll find it rather tight work at first, but you'll soon be making money on your own account, and when you are a full-fledged stockbroker there's no end to the possibilities. Of

course, it's a new thing for gentlemen to take to that sort of occupation; it wouldn't have done in my young days, but things are a good deal altered now, I am sorry to say. But, after all, now that Tom, Dick, and Harry have taken *our* places in the Army and Navy and the Church, our sons may as well take *their* fathers' places at the desk, and earn the wherewithal to oust them again.'

He got up and rang the bell. 'Bring a bottle of champagne, Jane,' he said to the servant, and then turned to Nigel with a smile of mingled conviviality and affection. 'We'll drink good luck to you, my boy,' he said, with a softness that was rare. 'We've fallen out a bit sometimes, and you haven't quite learned to look at things as I do yet; but you're young, and we all thought we knew better than the old folks once. After all, blood is thicker than water, and you and I hang closer to each other than any one else. God bless you, Nigel! If ever you want a friend in this world, remember that your old father is the best you have got, when all is said and done.'

He spoke with such sincere feeling, that Nigel was almost overcome. His shy, sealed-up nature hungered for the affection of which he had so seldom received any proofs, and a burst of emotion brought a lump into his throat and a rush of tears to his eyes as he grasped his father's outstretched hand. They pledged each other in the champagne, and the Colonel continued the flow of genial garrulity. He recounted stories of men he had known who had gone into the city and made large fortunes. He explained that, after all, the greatness of England was bound up in her commerce; and that though other careers might be more alluring from a picturesque point of view, there was nothing like business for showing the real stuff in a man, it being his opinion that nearly all business men were rogues and swindlers, and that a young man might

therefore achieve fame of a most desirable kind by showing that it was possible to make money by honourable methods.

His various statements were so contradictory, that if Nigel had listened to them—which he did not—the impression conveyed would have been curious. The fact was that Colonel Maystone's detestation of business methods and business men was genuine. It was a bitter thing to him to imagine his son as a stockbroker's clerk ; but he saw the difficulties in the way of other careers for a poor man, and admitted the necessity, though with secret revolt ; and it was only the delight of having triumphed over Nigel's opposition to the scheme that mitigated his abhorrence of the scheme itself.

When dinner and the champagne were finished, and the Colonel was sipping his port, according to his invariable custom, in front of the sitting-room fire, while Nigel sat smoking by his side, the old man grew more serious, and gave his son much advice concerning his life in London. Like all simple-minded people, Colonel Maystone believed himself to be particularly well versed in the wiles of the world ; and the counsel he gave was such a curious combination of shrewdness and ignorance, prejudice and kindness, that if Nigel had attended to and followed it, he might have become sufficiently eccentric to obtain a considerable notoriety on taking up his abode in the metropolis.

The Colonel was, fortunately, too busy talking to notice his son's preoccupation ; and when he had at last exhausted his stock of original precepts for the guidance of young men in a great city, he bustled off to the writing-table, and settled down to indite a budget of correspondence. He wrote to his bankers, and to Messrs. Prowse and Flatten, and then to several old friends living in London, to ask them

to give a thought to the young man now and then. The recipients were likely to be somewhat puzzled by the extraordinary mixture of satisfaction and disgust with which Colonel Maystone viewed the commencement of his son's business career. Being desirous of concealing the conflict in his mind, he naturally succeeded in giving an exaggerated impression of it.

Nigel stole away to his bedroom. He felt sad and lonely. His father's exceptional cordiality had only served to impress upon him more deeply the width of the gulf which lay between them. He looked round the little room which had been his from his earliest infancy, and thought with scarcely a pang that probably he would never sleep in it again, except as an occasional visitor. This dull little cottage, which he called 'home,' had few tender associations for him. He was surprised to find how easy a thing it seemed to leave it; for he realised that a fresh starting-point in his life had come, and that his early youth and all that pertained to it were done with. He had finished his days as an unbroken colt, and was about to begin life in harness. For, though he regarded the post which he had made up his mind to take as merely a temporary one, and intended to change it for something more congenial at the first opportunity, he knew that life for him must mean work, and that this was now seriously to begin.

From his window he could see a faint moon struggling through thin clouds and whitening the mists which blurred the dull, flat fields and rounded, undulating slopes. It was not an interesting landscape at any time, and every feature called back to him the rather cheerless childhood which he was glad to think was finished. A few soft memories of distant, occasional bright days gave a touch of regret to his retrospect. But, on the whole, he looked

forward with the feeling that the future, though not particularly inviting, had the possibility of better things than the past. As he pondered, his naturally sanguine and enthusiastic temperament asserted itself once more, and he saw himself looming through the shadowy future as a second Mirabeau. Perhaps some day he might succeed in doing something to alleviate the misery of mankind, in pushing his countrymen a step further in the course of progress. And perhaps, also, Gladys Stour might see and applaud.

Colonel Maystone knocked at his door and came in.

'When you are living in London,' he said, 'I am afraid you won't be able to afford to drink wine. But here's the address of the men who sell the best whisky I have ever tasted or hope to taste. And perhaps you might care to have this Bible. Good night!'

## CHAPTER II

### ADRIFT

IN the course of a few days Nigel Maystone was installed in a London lodging, and felt, as many have done before him, like a drop of rain which has fallen into the sea and lost its identity in the mass of water. The season was just beginning, and the frequent sight of splendid carriages and rich dresses added to his shrinking sense of personal obscurity. The isolation he had experienced when he first arrived at Sandlesford was as nothing compared to his isolation now. In all the varied crowd that thronged the streets there seemed to be no type with which he had anything in common. The country-bred lad, accustomed to quiet and deliberation and monotony, shrank from all this busy turmoil and haste, feeling as if a bitter wind were making his face tingle.

He had very little money, and was obliged to content himself with a single room in a by-street near Victoria Station. He had no club; and though his name was down for one or two, it would be some years before he would come up for election; moreover, at the present time he could not have afforded the amount of subscription asked at any club that was not the merest pothouse. Consequently, his evenings at first were not very cheerful.

But though they were a little dull, he preferred them to the daytime, spent in Messrs. Prowse and Flatten's office. A dark, bare room, lighted by windows placed high up, and

looking out on to a dingy yellow wall, where it was scarcely ever possible to do without artificial light, even on a sunny day, seemed rather a dungeon to a man accustomed to spend his life generally in the open air and always away from towns. The physical result was a heavy, aching head; the mental, a profound depression of spirits.

He had three fellow-clerks. Two of them were amiable, simple-minded, and dull; the third was clever and unwholesome, both mentally and physically. The dull pair conversed much concerning suburban lawn-tennis clubs, subscription balls, and bicycle rides. They did not perceive the undisguised contempt with which their clever colleague regarded their views of life. He discoursed mostly about his own exploits as a consumer of strong drink and a Don Juan of the music-halls. He also professed a great interest in racing, and brought a sporting paper to the office every morning, though he knew about as much concerning horses as he did of the science of Egyptology. He was pale and undersized, and decidedly old for his age. His name was Jones, and he represented a type.

He was highly thought of by Mr. Prowse, who frequently came into the clerks' office for a gossip with him. Prowse was a florid, over-fed young man, dressed a little too flashily to look quite like a gentleman, but carrying an atmosphere of wealth about him. He gave one the idea of being all purple and fine linen outside, finished off with gold—and all champagne and rich food within. His tastes were a sort of *édition de luxe* of those which Jones affected, and they kept up a firm friendship, with the aid of much patronising condescension on the part of Prowse and much cringing flattery on the part of Jones. Maystone conceived an intense repugnance and contempt for both of them, and they seemed to discover it intuitively and hated him accordingly.

Mr. Flatten was of a different stamp. He was tall, dark, and intensely respectable. He wore a shiny frock-coat of a Nonconformist cut, large plain gold studs, and a small black tie, rather like a boot-lace. He was well known in certain religious circles, and had an undoubted talent for laying up treasure in this world and the next. Maystone found him less offensive than Prowse, but more contemptible.

It cannot be said that the young man approached this group of his fellow-creatures in a very tolerant or charitable spirit. But he was in a bitter mood, and his eyes were somewhat jaundiced.

As a concession to his father's wishes, he called upon sundry old family friends, and in the course of a few weeks he received intermittent invitations to various social functions, of which he availed himself in a spirit of resignation. To him, who found it none too easy to keep himself in presentable clothes, or even in a sufficiency of plain food, it appeared a hollow mockery to hear people talk as if life consisted of hunting and shooting, of Hurlingham and the river, and as if the greatest troubles of existence were the putting down of an extra horse, or a disease amongst the grouse.

The thing which strengthened him most in his resolution to take his place on the drill-ground of society was the hope of meeting Gladys Stour. But the hope was dim; for he suspected that she sought the company of the more brilliant and cultivated section of the great world, and there was not much chance of finding her in the houses to which he was admitted. One of his first actions had been to call upon Lady Maria Mellins, but she was out. He left his card, and lived through a daily fluctuation of hope and disappointment whenever he heard the postman's knock. But amongst the few letters he received, none came to show him that his existence was remembered in the only quarter



where he dreaded oblivion. He had not the courage to call again, for fear of being thought importunate.

Except on the few evenings when he frequented society, he spent most of his spare time in wandering through the streets, with the interlude of a frugal dinner in some cheap restaurant. Feeling solitary and outcast himself, his revolutionary opinions grew to a fervid pitch that amounted to passion. They were still vague and undefined. He had not yet made up his mind to identify himself with any particular section of political opinion. His creed amounted merely to the statement that a vast portion of the human race lived in suffering and want, while a numerically insignificant class revelled in everything that could make life desirable. He was beginning to see dimly that any material readjustment was but a small first step towards the solution of the problem of general happiness. But he believed it to be a step, and one which ought to be made, though he did not know how.

He came across sundry old Oxford acquaintances and friends, and amongst them a man named Batton. Batton was a clever youth of humble birth, who had come up to Oxford with a scholarship from some obscure school, and had been scarcely known at all to most of the men in his college. Maystone's natural sympathy with any one who was unjustly despised had led him to cultivate his acquaintance. Batton, like himself, was keenly interested in social problems; and, with the usual love for a label, proclaimed himself with much pomp to be an ardent Collectivist.

He was a mild-looking, round-faced young man, with large dreamy eyes and shaggy hair. In dress and demeanour he strove, without success, to resemble the poet Shelley. He was now earning a scanty living by writing occasional articles for more or less obscure newspapers.

These fervid youths made many nocturnal expeditions

together through the gas-lit streets. They sought out the worst slums, chiefly in the East End, and fed the fire of revolt within their breasts with the sights they witnessed there. The squalid, grotesque tragedy of life in these places haunted Maystone's imagination like a ghastly dream. The whole spectacle lay in an eternal shadow. In this wider misery he forgot his own.

But he was essentially a dreamer; and though his life seemed to be passing through a dark fog, there were gleams of light. He believed most ardently in the continual advance of the human species, and many a slight incident seemed to him a sign of vast good mingled with the evil. He did not lose hope either for the world or for himself. His own troubles indeed were easily forgotten. Through the darkness of his mind he saw Gladys Stour's face like a vision of another world. And, to a man of his temperament, the dream was almost a reality.

He did not confide this secret to Batton, but the possession of it made him a sympathetic recipient of the confidences of that person, who was more communicative. He carried in his heart the image of a Miss Chilvey, who lived in the suburbs, and came to London every day to work in a type-writing office. Her mode of life was the cause of many impassioned outbursts on the part of her swain.

'Think what it means, Maystone! People talk of tragedies, but there is no tragedy like the slow grinding of commonplace drudgery. For a woman, too! And such a woman! Look at those languid creatures in their carriages! They live in an atmosphere absolutely removed from the ugliness of life. Everything about them breathes refinement and beauty and grace. And half of them have the tastes of a school-girl and the intellectual powers of a Hottentot. And *She*, who was born with all the gifts that most of them lack, is wearing

out her youth in mechanical slavery. Just think of her life ! Her cultivated, gentle, sensitive mind bent on its monotonous task ; her soft eyes fixed on the keys where her slender fingers incessantly move ; and before her the soulless, cold machine, ticking, ticking, as she works, like Death's clock telling off the fleeting moments of her life ! Oh, it's horrible !'

'Why does her father allow it ?' Maystone asked.

'How can he help himself ? He is not rich. But he is not quite sympathetic about her. He is a wrong-headed man in many ways.'

'What ways ?'

'Oh, he won't see things in a right light. He is clever and well read. He is a real master of the dry bones of political economy—I doubt if there are many men who have a wider theoretical knowledge of the subject—but his practical views are all wrong. Do you know, he is an absolute opponent of Socialism ?'

He looked at Maystone with the air of one imparting surprising and terrible intelligence. Maystone felt a little uncomfortable.

'I think I ought to tell you,' he answered with some hesitation, 'that I am not quite sure how far I approve of Socialism myself. Of course, I am on your side in reality,' he went on hastily ; 'my aim is the same. But I am not yet quite certain about the method.'

They were walking up St. Martin's Lane as they talked, and had turned into one of the numerous dingy little streets which still surround that thoroughfare. Batton drew his breath sharply as he heard Maystone's speech. Then he stopped, and, waving his hand towards the squalid scene before them, said—

'You see *that*, and you are still in doubt about the method ?'

In the brown dusk, faintly lighted by scattered lamps, ragged, unlovely figures were wandering like lost spirits. A few sullen-looking loafers slouched round the door of a public-house. Dirty, untidy women sat on doorsteps or leaned against the wall, talking together in harsh, loud voices. Uncared-for children played in the gutters or cried unnoticed in corners. Two or three tawdry, shameless girls came down the street singing a vulgar song, while under-sized, evil-looking young men shouted coarse comments as they passed. It was not a very attractive spectacle.

Maystone's hot temper fired up.

'Good God!' he exclaimed, 'do you suppose I don't feel it all as much as you do! Do you think it doesn't haunt me day and night? I know it has got to be altered. But the only question is how that is to be done, and I won't make up my mind too hastily, even if I *am* accused of not caring.'

'I am sure you care,' Batton answered, 'but I mistrust you cautious people. I must certainly introduce you to Mr. Chilvey. He is caution personified in the way of adopting opinions, though he is prompt enough in action. He lets his intellect rule his heart a great deal too much. Take care that you don't make the same mistake. People think that you can trust your intellect more than your heart I believe in exactly the reverse proposition.'

'How many people have got either intellect or heart, Batton?' asked a voice behind them. They turned abruptly, and found themselves confronting a young man of about Maystone's age, dressed like a working-man. He was very thin, and his face was pallid. His hair hung over his forehead in straight, lank, dull-coloured streaks. His sunken blue eyes gleamed with an intensity that almost suggested madness; it was like the glare of a wild beast. His thin lips seemed perpetually curved in a bitter smile. His appearance unmistakably betokened poverty, ill-health, and

passionate hatred, a keen intellect, a fierce temper, and very considerable vanity.

‘Oh, Rennett,’ said Batton, ‘how are you?’

Rennett coughed and spat on the pavement. Then he laughed savagely.

‘I’m all right,’ he said; ‘it’s only rich people who can afford to be ill. We go on till we drop. The working classes always have perfect health, you know, as well as most of the other blessings of existence.’

Maystone gazed at him with mingled feelings. There was something repellent and almost frightening about him; and yet he felt a keen sensation of pity as he watched the haggard face. The man was evidently consumptive, and looked half starved as well.

‘Have you been speaking lately?’ asked Batton.

‘Oh, I’m always speaking. I’ve been at it this afternoon in the Park. There were only a few to listen, but I may have started a spark in one or two of them. You never can tell. And it’s a good place to inspire you. When you see those carriages rolling by, and all the cursed, decked-out men and women who live and fatten on our misery, it doesn’t take you long to find something to say.’

‘But aren’t you at work now?’ asked Batton; ‘I thought you were with Allen and Block?’

Rennett laughed contemptuously.

‘Allen and Block don’t care to have people under them who think for themselves. We fell out pretty soon. Old Allen told me when I left that I was an idle, mischief-making rascal, and should come to no good. He may live to be sorry he said it.’

His eyes glittered with rage as he spoke. Suddenly he turned abruptly on Maystone.

‘Who’s your friend?’ he asked.

‘This is Mr. Maystone,’ Batton answered; ‘you needn’t

mind what you say before him. His heart's in the right place.'

'I don't mind what I say before any one,' said Rennett. 'But every one's heart is in the right place as long as they don't get beyond talking.' He gazed scornfully at Maystone's face, and cast a glance at his clothes. Maystone was always neatly dressed.

'I see what you are,' Rennett went on. 'You're one of those kind people who take a sentimental interest in the poor, and come down occasionally from your comfortable homes to have a patronising look at their misery. You're a university gentleman, I daresay.'

His tone was insolent, but Maystone kept command of his temper. He felt that Rennett's fanaticism revealed such depths of suffering and bitter indignation, that its violence must be excused.

'I was at Oxford,' he said. 'But I don't think that is any reason why I cannot take an unprejudiced view of life. Whatever station one may happen to be born in, it is possible that one may learn to see that the brotherhood of men is not affected by small things like that.'

'It's possible,' said Rennett in the same tone, 'but it isn't probable. You *may* be all right. But I don't trust any of your lot. Even if you break away from the views you've inherited for a time, they generally get hold of you again later on. The comfortable theory of life comes back as you grow older. As to the brotherhood of men, that has nothing to do with you and your class. It won't begin till you have all been swept away. Some fools talk of converting you. But what you have inherited for generations will always break out again. No! it's not till we have levelled you all down and are able to start afresh that there will be any hope for the miserable toilers. But it will come! The day isn't so far off as some of you believe! There are signs

of the approaching earthquake already. And, by God, it will be a big one! And on that day those who toil not nor spin will have a rude awakening, which will spare none of them, whether they have lived out their lives in honest brutality, or come hypocritically snivelling after us with their sham, worthless sympathy!’

His voice rose excitedly, and his face was bent towards Maystone with an expression of mingled enthusiasm and ferocity. His speech, which had been delivered with all the exaggerated gestures of the stump orator, ended in a violent fit of coughing. He turned away abruptly and hurried into the gloom before Maystone had time to collect his ideas after the shock of this unexpected onslaught.

The amiable Batton was alarmed lest he should have been hurt by the attack, and endeavoured to soothe his spirit.

‘Dick Rennett’s a rough chap with his tongue,’ he said, ‘but you must not take it all too literally. He was just the same with me at first, and it took a long time to gain his confidence. He is bitter and suspicious.’

‘Oh, it’s all right,’ Maystone answered untruthfully; ‘I didn’t mind. I expect he has been through some bad times, poor fellow!’

‘Want and misery all his life. Besides, he is a clever man, and has educated himself. You must have noticed that he didn’t speak like a workman.’

‘What is he by trade?’

‘Nominally a bricklayer. But that fierce spirit leads him to quarrel with all his employers, and he is nearly always out of work. As you see, he is a very extreme man, and his creed is a violent one. But extreme men are necessary.’

‘Yes, his creed is certainly a violent one,’ said Maystone thoughtfully. The adventure had set him pondering a good deal. He was looking for a gospel of love, and seemed to

have found a gospel of hatred. If he threw in his lot with these men, as he more and more wished to do, he realised that Rennett would be a difficulty—perhaps a hostile force. It was indeed a rough path, where obstacles reared themselves at the very mouth.

When he reached home that evening, tired and depressed, he found a note from Lady Maria Mellins inviting him to dinner. His heart throbbed with excitement and pleasure as he sat down to write his acceptance of the invitation.



## CHAPTER III

### SUNBEAMS

CHARLIE RAFFORD had developed a fit of industry. He had accepted a brief in a great case which was impending, and other work was also beginning to flow in upon him. From time to time, previously, he had shown application and ability ; and if he had not given way so often to idle moods, which had led him to throw away good chances and neglect promising opportunities, he might now have had a considerable practice at the bar.

He resisted all inducements to leave London, and was most regular in attendance at his chambers. He even took to going to bed comparatively early, and the riotous supper-parties and other nocturnal festivities, which had formerly engrossed so much of his time, were seldom enlivened by his company. He rode in the Park early every morning, and was already occupied with his day's work by the time that most of his acquaintance had begun to exchange greetings in Rotten Row. People who were interested in his doings gathered from the report of other early risers that he was generally to be seen cantering beside Miss Gladys Stour, who had also developed a taste for figuring in the ranks of the 'liver brigade.' This fact, coupled with the change in his habits, was regarded as pointing in the direction of matrimony. The interest roused in certain quarters was so strong that Walter Flaire, in spite of his

unrelaxed labours in ballrooms during the small hours of the morning, rose from his bed on several occasions and mounted his steady-going cob before breakfast, in the hope of arriving at some conclusion on the matter. He gathered little information, however, as he found that Miss Stour's cavalier proved to be the taciturn Presterley quite as often as Charlie Rafford. The state of uncertainty in which he found himself he regarded as a distinct stain on his professional reputation; but his feelings were somewhat restored to equilibrium by the announcement of an engagement between Tommy Woolton and Miss Tintern, which re-established his fame as a prophet amongst the elderly ladies whose oracle he was.

In reality Rafford was drifting before the currents of chance. His industrious mood had developed almost unconsciously, and was chiefly due to the reaction in an active mind against an aimless life of amusement. For the time being he was tired of play, and found work a bracing change. His sleeping ambition began to awaken. He was conscious of possessing talent and power, and for the moment, at any rate, he was moved by a desire to make them felt. The lurking contempt which he had always held for the opinion of his fellow-men had hitherto kept his wish to excel in a lukewarm state. But he now began to experience the far more strenuous ambition to satisfy the cravings of his own powers for fulfilment, which is mainly independent of popular applause. He realised his own incompleteness—a very potent spur.

Moreover, he was much in want of money. He had inherited little from his father; and though substantial legacies from other relations had placed him in tolerably comfortable circumstances, his mode of life had greatly reduced a satisfactory income. He was not a great gambler, and had never been very recklessly extravagant. But he

had lived with rich men and shared in their pastimes, and the old fable of the earthenware pot was beginning to be exemplified.

His intercourse with Gladys Stour was even more aimless than the rest of his actions. She and Lady Maria seemed to have entered into a tacit agreement to bring him into her company as often as possible, and he had done little more than take advantage of the facilities offered. The girl interested and attracted him. Sometimes he wondered whether she did not rouse an even stronger feeling. But that thought he invariably thrust aside.

His presence was sure to be a source of annoyance to Presterley, and once or twice he wondered if it was quite fair to let his half-hearted attentions divert Miss Stour from more serious business. But as Presterley was always the same—silent, pertinacious, and apparently unmoved—he did not pay much heed to the scruple.

Presterley was certainly a little annoyed ; but it did not trouble him much. He knew what he wanted, and meant to have it. And as he was the only one of the party in this unwavering frame of mind, his chances of success were great.

Rafford had got into the habit of dropping in frequently at the house in Eaton Place which had been left to Lady Maria for her life by the deceased brewer. The old lady pressed him to dine there whenever he was not engaged elsewhere ; and though he did not carry out her request to the letter, he was very often an informal guest.

‘It keeps you out of mischief for a time,’ Lady Maria explained to him one day. ‘And though you are so blind and so stupid and so perverse that you *won’t* fall in love with Gladys and come and help me to rescue her from this wretched monster of a man, still I don’t lose hope as long as I can get you together.’

Rafford was a good deal annoyed by her tactless remarks

on this subject, but he reflected that it would be hardly fair to expect her to be bound by the rules of ordinary human beings. Eccentricity has its privileges. He laughed and said—

‘I never fall in love with any one who isn’t married already. I have always been blamed for not thinking enough of conventional morality ; and as nothing could be more conventional than loving your neighbour’s wife is nowadays, I sternly resist the temptation to indulge in more innocent and unfashionable romances.’

‘Does that mean that you are going to begin to make love to Gladys as soon as she is married to Mr. Presterley?’ asked Lady Maria abruptly. ‘I daresay that will suit your jaded taste better than the milk-and-water of doing it before.’

She wagged her head angrily, and glared at him through her eyeglass. Rafford was amused, and yet felt the least bit uncomfortable.

‘I don’t think I am quite such a brute as you make out,’ he answered humbly ; and the old lady, overcome by his meekness, almost wept, and loaded him with apologies.

She explained that she had asked Maystone to dinner, and begged Rafford to come and meet him.

‘There won’t be any one else,’ she said. ‘I liked what I saw of that young man at Sandleford, and so I thought I would get him here when we were going to be alone, and have a quiet chat with him. I want you to be here, because I mean to try and drive some of his absurd Socialistic theories out of him ; and as he knows much more about all these questions than I do, he’d be sure to get the best of the argument unless there is some one to back me up. I know you’re not a Socialist ; you’re much too selfish.’

‘I didn’t know that you were such an enemy of unselfishness, nor that it was particularly connected with Socialism,’ said Rafford.

‘Oh, don’t put on that ridiculous smile! Of course you know what I mean,’ said Lady Maria, who did not quite know what she had meant herself, her tongue being apt to run away with her. ‘Anyhow, will you come?’

‘I shall be delighted,’ said Rafford, with an uneasy thought. In truth, he was conscious that he was spending too much time in this house. If it went on much longer, he would be obliged seriously to consider his position with regard to Gladys; and so many conflicting forces were at work on his mind, that serious consideration was the very last thing he wished to plunge into.

When the evening in question arrived, and he reached the drawing-room, a considerable time after the dinner hour, he found Maystone struggling with his shyness in the presence of the two ladies, who were gradually bringing him back into a condition of self-command. After a sleepless night, the poor young man’s nerves were hardly fit for the ordeal of again entering the presence of his goddess. But, in a few minutes, the simple friendliness of his companions put him at his ease again, and brought back to his mind, with mingled pleasure and regret, the bright days at Sandleford, so sharply contrasted with his present life.

He was overpowered by the attractions of Miss Stour. Certainly she was looking extremely well, and even an unprejudiced observer would have admired her considerably. Rafford also was anything but unmoved by her appearance, though he did not pass beyond the critical stage.

Moreover, Gladys was in high spirits, and at dinner the ball of conversation bounded rather than rolled. Maystone felt the serious mood, in which his mind had been cast so long, evaporating in this atmosphere. He forgot the problems that saddened him, and forgot also his own loneliness and poverty. In his shy, subdued manner he became almost humorous; and more than once Lady

Maria laughed heartily at his remarks, and beamed approval on him through her eyeglass. Maystone began to experience the unaccustomed sensation of a social success.

'Have you got nice rooms?' asked Miss Stour, who was betraying an interest in his doings which filled him with a glow of pleasure.

'I have only one room,' he said, 'but that isn't bad. It would be an advantage if any two legs of the bed had happened to be the same length, and I shouldn't mind if the dust of generations were cleaned off the windows. But still, there is nothing particular to complain of.'

Miss Stour gazed at him with eyes of serious astonishment.

'Do you mean to say you live in one room?' she said. 'Oh, but of course you spend all your time at your club. What club do you belong to?'

'I don't belong to any at present,' he answered.

'But where do you dine?' she asked in tones of concern.

'Oh, at some chop-house.'

Her mind, which had been filled with commiseration, flew off at a tangent again.

'Ah, how nice!' she exclaimed; 'that is what I call life. You men are so much better off than we are in that way. We must eat at home, in the conventional way, for fear of shocking some one. You go to fascinating little places and dine in a really picturesque and bohemian manner. I wish I could dine at chop-houses. It must be delightful.'

'Delightful as a pastime,' said Rafford, looking at her with his usual amused smile, 'but not *quite* so pleasant when there is no alternative. Even chops will pall after a time. I think you would soon want to come back to this clean tablecloth and the artistic efforts of Lady Maria's most excellent cook.'

Gladys flushed slightly and said nothing. She gazed at her plate, feeling Rafford's half-mocking eyes upon her. Lady Maria unconsciously helped her by breaking into the conversation in voluble fashion. Gladys looked up and stared at the pictures on the opposite wall with an abstracted air. In reality she was tingling all over. She was furious at being snubbed, irritated to think that this man never met her on the level, but was always gently putting her straight from above, as if she were a naughty child. Every time she met him she experienced the same conflict between rebellion and attraction. He was stronger than she was, and she had not yet brought herself to confess it.

But the current of her thought changed as she glanced round the well-furnished room and contrasted her own comfortable mode of life with Maystone's solitude. It seemed to her that he must be very lonely and miserable. It was evident that he was dreadfully poor. She turned to him in her usual impulsive way.

'Why don't you come here oftener?' she said. 'How were we to know that you were living such a solitary life if you didn't take the trouble to come and tell us?'

'I did call once,' he replied apologetically; 'I didn't know that I might come again.'

She looked astonished.

'How absurd!' she exclaimed; 'of course we should always be glad to see you. Come as often as you can. This house isn't a convent, though there *are* only women in it.'

'I don't know that they always used to object to men in convents,' remarked Lady Maria scandalously; 'but, anyhow, I hope you will come often to this one, and you can confess all your sins to me; and you won't find us always fasting either. Come to luncheon any Sunday, and every Sunday if you can. We're always at home then.'

The two ladies rose and departed, while Maystone, overcome with confusion and delight, was incoherently endeavouring to murmur his thanks.

Rafford had been listening to the conversation without joining in it much. He also was touched by the young man's friendless and homeless condition, though he characteristically concluded that it was probably very good for him to rough it a bit. But something about Maystone had appealed to his softer side from the first, and he resolved to endeavour to do something for him. Women were sentimental creatures, of course; but, all the same, it was rather nice of that girl to be so much interested in the matter. A pretty girl in the flush of a London season might well have been pardoned if she had had no attention to give to the sorrows of a young man of a distinctly unfashionable type.

In the conversation that ensued between them, after the departure of the ladies, he was surprised to find himself most distinctly interested. They quickly drifted on to the topic that was absorbing Maystone's thoughts—the condition of the poor and the general social problem. Maystone, for his part, was surprised to find with what sympathy and knowledge Rafford discussed the subject. His views were the antipodes of Maystone's revolutionary tenets. He was a Conservative, and especially detested Socialism. But he seemed to understand thoroughly the opposite point of view.

At the present moment, in the glow of enjoyment, Maystone felt very well satisfied with the existing condition of things. As he walked home to his lodgings later on, his heart was warmer with happiness than it had been for some time past. He looked forward to the future with pleasure. He was already engaged to dine with Rafford on the following evening, and to speedily revisit the house in Eaton



Place. He wondered if, after all, it was worth while to worry over the misery which must always exist, and perhaps was not so bad as it looked.

There soon came a violent reaction in his mind, and he felt like a traitor to his own conscience. But as he lay in bed, with Gladys Stour's features shaping themselves in the darkness before him, he felt that to live in the same atmosphere as her would be worth all the torments of self-reproach.

Rafford was sitting smoking in his own rooms, also seeing the same face. He knew that it did not mean anything very serious to him; and yet he could not get it out of his mind.

## CHAPTER IV

### UNDERCURRENTS

THE next few weeks were a sunny time for Nigel Maystone. Lady Maria, Miss Stour, and Rafford seemed to have entered into a conspiracy to make life pleasant for him. He was deeply touched by the cordial friendliness with which they welcomed his society and plotted to include him in many social amusements. But he was touched most of all by the delicacy and tact with which they invariably arranged to spare him all possible expense. He was saved many a cab fare and the price of many theatre tickets by the skilful way in which vacant seats in broughams and theatre boxes were placed at his disposal. Needless to say that for this final touch of thoughtfulness he gave all the credit to Miss Stour. As a matter of fact, it was entirely due to Rafford.

While he sunned himself in the girl's presence, he often regarded with astonishment her unfailing spirits and apparent lightness of heart. She seemed to have been left out of the scope of earthly care and sorrow.

If he could have read her thoughts, he would have been startled. The smiling face was but a false index to a heart which was agitated with doubt and anxiety, mortified pride, painful hesitation.

She was racked in the torture-chamber of hopeless passion. Her whole nature incessantly cried to Charlie

Rafford, and she knew that the appeal was vain. That he was attracted by her to a certain extent was clear. But clearer still was the hopelessness of expecting him to reveal any emotion corresponding to the fire which devoured her. With despairing recklessness she had yearned to awaken in him the passion which she had scarcely hoped might slumber there. But he had always remained the same, polite, friendly, and self-controlled. She was bound to confess that he had never for a moment taken advantage of her self-abasement before him. And naturally this only increased her anger against him when moods of revulsion came and she passed through brief but recurring periods of hatred.

To lower herself was bitter enough ; but to lower herself fruitlessly, only to be repaid with almost contemptuous kindness, was torture.

In her reckless distress, she never stopped to consider what might be the effect on Maystone of her treatment of him ; for she used him as a counter in the game with Rafford. The attention she paid him was in great part a last desperate effort to rouse some latent jealousy in Rafford's heart. But the attempt was a complete failure. It gave unbounded pleasure to poor Maystone. Simple-minded and humble, at any rate in this respect, it never occurred to him to dream of winning her affection ; nor did it occur to him to suspect where this affection was bestowed. He adored without hope this something afar from the sphere of his sorrow. Without analysing her motives, he believed that she was intending to marry Presterley. And the idea of attempting to combat such an event never crossed his mind.

Rafford clearly saw all that was going on ; indeed, it was made unmistakable to him. He did not know the state of Maystone's mind, and did not suspect the existence of his

hopeless enslavement, or perceive how Gladys' conduct increased it. But so far as the matter touched himself, it filled him with grave thoughts.

He was not often in a state of indecision, and seldom shirked the task of making up his mind. But in this instance his whole nature seemed disorganised. Gladys attracted him more strongly than he would confess. And yet he knew that the absorption was not complete. He had never passed beyond the critical stage. In some of her many moods she annoyed and even bored him. She had a great capacity for admiring the second-rate. And when he was expected to grow enthusiastic over inferior artists and musicians and writers, and found that his inability to do so hurt her deeply, he realised how impossible was complete union between them.

He sometimes told himself that he ought to avoid her and end the matter. But he had not the strength of mind to do it. After all, he might be mistaken. He could not gauge his feelings accurately. This might really be the critical moment of his life, and the thing which he would so much like to meet with might be in sight, though he could not yet see it clearly. The scars left by his stormy past were smarting afresh. He wanted to enjoy life for a little.

Thus he remained with his mind like a ball incessantly rolling up and down a plane, with love at one extremity and depreciation at the other.

Meanwhile Presterley was carrying on the siege with deliberate pertinacity. He called frequently, and stolidly sat out all other visitors. He held out many baits wherewith to inveigle the ladies into his company—theatre stalls, opera boxes, dinner at innumerable places in and out of London. They were compelled to accept sometimes; and, to tell the truth, though Lady Maria hated the necessity, Gladys was not unwilling.

She was resolved on her plan of action. Either she would have the man she wanted and let the true side of her nature develop freely, or she would throw romance, sentiment, idealism to the dogs, and play for her own hand against any worldling in London. In the latter case all she would ask would be riches and freedom. If she married Presterley, she was likely to have both. She believed that he would be a doll in her hands. Moreover, she rather liked him. It pleased her to feel what power she had over him, and his general unpopularity roused in her combative soul a tendency to make the best of him. She took care to keep a link with him, determined that this last card, if necessary, should save her from utter defeat at the hands of Fortune.

She was ignorant of two facts about him. One, that he habitually spent double his income, and that his property was already much encumbered. The other, that he was slowly developing into a confirmed drunkard.

## CHAPTER V

### MATTERS BECOME CRITICAL

MISS TINTERN had organised a youthful dinner-party, to be followed by a visit to the Earl's Court Exhibition, and when inviting Gladys Stour had asked her to give the name of any man she might wish to be included in the party. Gladys had unhesitatingly suggested Rafford, and he had been asked, and had accepted. On the morning of the day in question, she received an unexpected visit from Miss Tintern.

'My dear Gladys,' exclaimed the latter young woman, entering the room in breezy fashion, and embracing her effusively, 'mother has just had a telegram from Mr. Rafford to say he can't come to-night. Would you like us to ask any one else?'

'Did he give any reason?'

'Oh, business, or ill-health, or something; I forget what. Of course it was only an excuse, because something better has turned up. They're all alike, these men.'

'I suppose you never allow Sir Thomas to throw people over now,' remarked Gladys.

'Oh, Tommy is different. Besides, he's ridiculous the other way. Do you know, before we were engaged I had quite a quarrel with him once about a stupid old aunt of his. He was going to dine with her, and I wanted him; and when, after great difficulty, I persuaded him to tele-

graph and say he was laid up with influenza, he came to the opera with us, and the first person we saw was his aunt, sitting in the opposite box. And he was quite angry with *me*, if you please. He talked solemnly about the sanctity of the truth, and family duty, and all sorts of things. Dear old boy, he is so conscientious. Most men wouldn't have minded a bit, and I was *so* glad that *he* did.'

During this slightly involved discourse, Gladys was collecting her ideas. She was hurt and angry. Rafford evidently wanted to avoid the chance of an evening  *tête-à-tête* with her.

'Would you mind asking Mr. Presterley instead?' she said.

Miss Tintern made a grimace.

'Very well, dear, if you wish it. I hope it won't spoil Tommy's dinner. He says that the sight of Mr. Presterley takes away his appetite.'

Gladys flushed a little.

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' she said, 'any one else will do as well. I only suggested the first person who came into my head.'

Miss Tintern smiled, and Gladys flushed still more. She had scarcely hoped to take another woman in with such a remark, but had risked it for what it might be worth.

'Of course we 'll ask him,' replied Miss Tintern, 'as he is quite sure to come when he knows you will be there; it will save any bother or uncertainty. As to Tommy, it will do him good to eat less. He is growing much too fat.'

She kissed her friend and bustled away again, leaving Gladys to reflect that it was useless to fight against the decrees of Fate.

As Miss Tintern had anticipated, Presterley accepted readily, though he was already engaged. Miss Tintern guessed as much.

'More work for the recording angel, I expect,' she remarked as she read his note.

'I fancy Presterley keeps that official pretty well occupied at all times,' responded Woolton, who was standing by, with a grim chuckle.

'Perhaps the angel has given up noticing him,' said Miss Tintern. 'Probably he has marked him off in the book as a vicious fool, and left him. What *can* Gladys see in that man, Tommy?'

'Diamond tiaras and Paris clothes,' responded Sir Tommy laconically, and Miss Tintern sighed. She was genuinely fond of Gladys; and having, as she considered, made such a lucky dip into the matrimonial bag herself, it grieved her to think of what might be in store for her friend.

Presterley acquitted himself rather well at dinner on the whole. He talked more than usual, and obviously did his best to be agreeable. Gladys worked hard to draw him out, and her presence really seemed to inspire him. Tommy Woolton remarked on the circumstance to Miss Tintern afterwards as they drove together towards Earl's Court in a hansom cab.

'I don't want to be unfair to the fellow,' he said; 'I dare say he's a much better chap than we give him credit for.'

'I won't hear a word in his favour,' Miss Tintern replied hotly; 'as an ostler he might have been rather a superior person; as a contemplated husband for Gladys he's simply impossible.'

'But extremely probable,' added Sir Thomas. Miss Tintern could not deny it.

When the party was assembled at the entrance to the Exhibition, Miss Tintern gave them their orders; Mrs. Tintern, who was present, being accustomed to efface herself in the presence of her daughter.



'If any one should happen to get lost,' she remarked disingenuously, 'we will all meet here again at a quarter to eleven.'

Then she hurried forward with Woolton at a pace which soon put them into the category of the missing. The rest of the party kept up the pretence of walking together for a short time. But the law of gravity quickly asserted itself. In a few minutes Gladys found herself wandering alone with Presterley.

They went into the garden and sat down to listen to the band. Presterley did not attempt to converse, and Gladys was grateful to him. She sat dreamily listening to the music and watching the dark mass of moving figures in the lamp-lit garden. She began to feel more peaceful than she had done for a long time. The very fact that her companion was incapable of any sort of intellectual discourse was a decided relief. She felt tired, and wanted to let her brain rest on this couch of soft sight and sound.

The band stopped playing, and Presterley re-lit his cigar, which had gone out.

'By Jove, that was pretty,' he said.

'Are you fond of music?' she asked languidly.

'Awfully. Of course I don't understand all that classical rot, but I do like a pretty tune.'

'Why do you think classical music rot?' It was only natural that he should think it so, but the idea of his venturing to criticise anything rather annoyed her.

'I'm sorry I said so if you like it,' he answered slowly; 'I'm not a cultivated sort of chap, and I don't pretend to like things unless I do. But I'd try to like anything if you wished it.'

'It doesn't make the least difference to me,' she said.

'I know it doesn't. I wish it did. You've made *that* plain enough, at any rate.'

The humility of his tone touched her.

'Have I been very horrid?' she asked.

They had been speaking in low tones, but he dropped his voice to a whisper.

'You have been a bit rough on me, but I don't mind. I've known women like that before, but they have come round.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know what I mean. Will you marry me?'

Though Gladys had foreseen this suggestion for some time, it came rather unexpectedly at the moment, and she did not reply. Presterley believed that the matter was settled. Imperceptibly he changed his tone.

'Of course, I'm not one of your long-haired artistic chaps,' he said, with a touch of contempt in his voice, 'but I'm a pretty straight sort of fellow, and that's better than cleverness in the long-run. And I can make you pretty comfortable. There's plenty of money left, though I *have* been chucking it about a bit. You will say "Yes," won't you? By Jove, there won't be a fellow in the county will have such a wife, if only you'll consent. I'm not a saint, I know, but I'm no worse than most other chaps, and I shall be steady enough if I'm married. Let's settle it. You'll suit me. Don't you think I could suit you?'

He had completely destroyed the favourable impression made by his previous humility and gentleness. But Gladys was too listless and tired to feel disgusted. The situation merely struck her as being rather comic. She gazed at the moving figures, and the glamour which had been upon the scene, while the music lasted, seemed to have gone. Behind her she heard the rumble of the switchback railway and the vulgar shrieks with which the passengers were expressing their enjoyment of its motion. The surroundings seemed particularly appropriate for this unromantic

courtship. The hideous modern clothes, the underbred voices, the scent of bad tobacco, the flickering, theatrical little lamps on the edge of the formal grass-plots, made up a suitable combination. Surely the age of poetry was dead.

Presterley endeavoured to take her hand. She snatched it away and burst into a low peal of laughter. He gazed at her with stupid surprise.

'What are you laughing at?' he asked. 'I'm quite serious.'

'Oh, so am I,' she said; 'I was only laughing at the precision with which you stated the advantages of the contract you offered me.'

'I daresay I'm a fool,' he grumbled, 'but I don't see where the joke comes in. Can't you give me a plain answer?'

'Not now,' she answered, with another change of mood that brought the tears into her eyes; 'you must not be angry with me. I'm a little over-tired to-night, and can't think things out properly. You shall have a definite answer before very long.'

'But what need is there to wait?' he persisted in an aggrieved tone.

'I tell you, I want to think it over,' she said petulantly. 'I promise to give you an answer before the end of the season. Does that satisfy you? If not, you need not ask for it.'

Her tone of weary indifference alarmed him, as he had no intention of losing her.

'I will wait,' he replied quietly; 'if you think it fair, I won't object. But try to make up your mind soon.'

She shivered.

'It is getting cold,' she said; 'let us go and walk about a little. It must be nearly time to go back. We arrived very late.'

They sauntered away through the garden and buildings.

Gladys was very silent, and Presterley unusually talkative. He tried to amuse her by passing derogatory remarks on everything that they saw. Depreciation was his only idea of humour.

'They are poor shows, these Exhibitions,' he said ; ' I can't think why any one ever comes to them.'

'One must kill time somehow,' she replied, 'but he dies very hard.'

Presterley was puzzled to think why she should seem so sad.

When they rejoined the rest of the party, Miss Tintern came forward to meet them.

'Oh, Gladys,' she exclaimed, 'we met Harry Worland, and he tells us he is going back to Vienna next week. We have just been saying "Good-bye" to him.'

'Have you?' said Gladys ; 'I have just been saying "Good-bye" to myself.'

## CHAPTER VI

### THE DANCE OF FATE

THERE was a great ball at Bloomshire House. The carriages filled all the surrounding streets, and inside the house, broad as the stairs were, it was at one time quite difficult to get up them. Lady Bloomshire's arm must have ached before she had finished shaking hands with all her guests. It was reported that she seriously thought of asking Walter Flaire to hold it up for her, after the manner of Moses on a historic occasion.

Thanks to the kind offices of Rafford, Nigel Maystone had received an invitation. Balls had no great attraction for him; but he was moved by curiosity to see what was undoubtedly one of the most brilliant social events of the season, and also he confidently expected to meet Gladys Stour. So he went.

Though his democratic soul revolted against all this magnificence, he could not help being affected by the splendour of the scene. After shaking hands with Lady Bloomshire, he leaned over the balustrade for a time, watching the stream of people coming up the stairs. The blaze of light, the gorgeous dresses and flashing jewels, the beautiful faces and gleaming shoulders and arms of the women, made up a scene in such resplendent contrast with the commonplace dinginess of his ordinary life, that he almost felt as if he were dreaming. He saw elderly gentle-

men with broad ribands across their shirt fronts, and realised that he was surrounded by some of the great ones of the earth. The whole thing was a stage-play, a comedy, which the rest of mankind had for some reason consented to accept as serious. But it was a very beautifully mounted play, and the spectacle it afforded gave an undoubted temporary stimulus to his spirits.

He wandered away through the great crowded rooms, feeling a little lost in the throng of animated talkers, amongst whom he saw few familiar faces, and most of those were only familiar to him because the station of their owners had made them more or less public property. He was seized with an agonising attack of nervousness, and was for some minutes firmly under the impression that his coat was dusty, his hair standing on end, and his tie twisted under his ear. But fortunately he came across a looking-glass on one of the walls, which showed him a very neat figure, and dispelled his fears.

Presently he met Lord Seathwaite, who greeted him in a most friendly way, but with his usual air of melancholy. The poor man was wishing himself in bed, and wondering how long his wife would expect him to stay. Lady Seathwaite was only a few yards distant, and Maystone proceeded to pay his respects to her. She received him with a sort of frozen geniality, and inquired after his health and mode of life with patronising interest. He had never seen her look so handsome or so animated, and she was certainly one of the most striking women in the assemblage which she surveyed with such evident pleasure. To her imagining, Heaven was much like a ball at Bloomshire House, with a dash of the Church Congress added.

But during all this time he had seen no signs of Miss Stour, though it was already late when he arrived. He wandered through the crowded rooms looking for her; and

at last, as the music in the ballroom came to a close, amongst the crowd that streamed forth from its doors he met her. She was flushed with dancing, and her eyes glowed with animation. He had never seen her comeliness so strongly before, and the blood sang in his ears as he stepped forward to speak to her. She welcomed him with a bright smile and a friendly nod. He humbly asked for a dance.

'I am afraid I am engaged for the next four,' she answered, 'but you may have the fifth,' and before he could murmur his thanks, she was swept away in the stream of jostling couples.

It seemed a terribly long time to wait, and there was little chance of his finding another acquaintance with whom to dance in the meantime. He proceeded on his wanderings once more. Presently he met Rafford, who was just shaking himself free from the clutches of a loquacious duchess.

'Well, young man,' exclaimed Rafford, 'how are you getting on? Doing your duty in the dancing way?'

'I haven't met any one I know to dance with, and I hardly expect to.'

'Oh, come along then, and I'll get you some partners. There's Lady Belmouth over there with a new girl just out, who'd be most grateful for a young man.'

Maystone held back with another attack of shyness.

'Do you think she'd care about having me for a partner?' he said; 'I don't get on very well with these girls as a rule. I'm too serious, and don't know what to talk to them about.'

'You can always manage animals if you don't let them see that you're afraid of them,' Rafford retorted, with some lack of chivalry. 'Harden your heart and come along. She's quite a pretty girl.'

Before Maystone realised exactly what had happened, he found himself leading Lady Alice towards the ballroom, while Rafford stood watching them with an amused smile, wondering which was most afraid of the other.

Then he turned away with the same curious half-regretful feeling that he had experienced before. Was he really beginning to grow old? Youth and freshness seemed such a very attractive and far-away thing. There was not much novelty left in life now. The sparkling scene around him was so far a repetition of previous experiences, that he regarded it with scarcely any sensation beyond that of mild boredom. He would just as soon have been at home with a pipe.

Suddenly he met Gladys Stour returning with her partner, and realised that there *was* some interest left for him after all. The knowledge made him uncomfortable and rather angry. If he could have experienced a rush of overwhelming emotion at meeting her, he would have been almost glad. But this hesitating, unwilling, half-hearted feeling only irritated him.

'May I have this next dance?' he asked abruptly.

'I don't think I ought to give it you,' she said doubtfully.

'I am really engaged for the next four or five.'

'Oh, that doesn't matter. Let's go and sit down in a corner where we shan't be found, and have a chat.'

She hesitated a moment, and then mutely assented to this unscrupulous proposal. They threaded their way through the crowd, and finally reached a secluded corner in a small room, half hidden by a screen. The people, who passed through the room in a constant stream, scarcely noticed them.

They remained very silent for a long time. She was in a dreamlike, half-intoxicated condition, realising only that she was with him. He also was finding the spell of her



attraction growing stronger on him once more. If only it would not always grow cold again when they were apart! But he knew that it would, and resolved not to allow it to master him now.

'Whom ought you to be dancing with?' he asked, feeling that he must say something.

'Lord St. Pancras or Mr. Presterley—I forget which,' she said.

'I don't think I ought to have made you throw Presterley over,' he remarked, feeling rather guilty.

'Why not?'

'Because—well, I thought he was a great friend of yours, and—well——' he stopped in embarrassment. She smiled.

'You mean that you think I am going to marry him?'

'Oh, I don't know. Of course, people talk—but it is no business of mine. It is impertinent of me to speak of it.'

'Oh no. It is naturally interesting to one's—one's friends.'

He was silent. After a pause she asked—

'Do you believe in friendship between men and women?'

'Certainly not. It is bound to end in a catastrophe of some kind.'

Again she was silent. He said nothing more, and both began to feel nervous, apprehensive, and perhaps a little ridiculous. To end the silence he tried to talk of more general topics. He could talk well when he took the trouble, and he exerted himself greatly now in his effort to avoid the dangerous position in which they had already found themselves. He knew that he ought to bring matters definitely to an end one way or the other, but still he shirked the task of making up his mind.

Time crept on. Dance after dance began and ended,

but Gladys gave no thought to the partners she was disappointing. Presently Rafford stopped talking for a time, and another oppressive pause followed. Gladys looked at the passers-by as if for inspiration.

'Oh, look,' she said, 'there's that dreadful Mrs. Glenmure. I thought people had rather dropped her. I wonder how she came to be asked here.'

A pretty woman, of uncertain age, with a suspicious complexion, was standing by the doorway, talking to a man in what appeared to be a very confidential manner. Rafford did not look at her.

'Her husband is a cousin of Lady Bloomshire,' he said coldly. 'I suppose you don't object to her relations receiving her. What do you know against her?'

'Oh, nothing,' she replied, surprised and rather nettled by his tone; 'but she paints, and is always flirting with a lot of silly boys, and altogether she is very bad style.'

'It is better not to condemn people too easily,' he answered in the same tone; 'none of us know that we may not some day want a little charity ourselves. I daresay she is no worse than other women—better than some of the most respectable, who have sold themselves for money or titles.'

Gladys flushed fiercely. She was not sure if the blow was intentional, but she had certainly been hit in a weak place.

'That is not fair,' she said; 'the women who sell themselves have no one but themselves to reckon with. It is a matter that concerns their conscience and their self-respect, and affects no one else. But women like Mrs. Glenmure do actual harm. They poison the minds of weak, vain young men. They lower the whole ideal of women, and they have no right to complain if their sex treats them as traitors. I don't know if she is actually bad,

or only foolish and undignified, but how do you suppose a young man comes out after he has been through her hands? Is he likely to take a high view of women? Isn't it probable that he will be a little coarser, a little more immoral, a little less chivalrous? If he goes to the bad, hasn't she some responsibility?'

'I think that is a little unjust,' he said rather weakly.

'It is perfectly just,' she replied hotly; 'I know how it affects men, and through them us. Do you suppose that girls with a pure, unsullied view of life want to have men coming to them trained by women like that?'

She had turned the tables, and he felt a little uncomfortable on his side. He tried to laugh it off.

'Oh, I don't expect it matters,' he replied; 'it gives the men a chance of posing as interesting sinners, and the girls a chance of posing as saintly reformers. I believe the process is mutually interesting.'

She turned upon him with eyes full of anger.

'How can you stoop to talk like that?' she exclaimed; 'you haven't the excuse of believing in that cheap cynicism. If you owe nothing to me, do you owe nothing to yourself? Is it manly, or truthful, or in any way worthy of you to pretend to hold such a view? You—who might stand so high, if you only chose to!'

He remained silent. For once, at least, she had got the upper hand. He felt rather small and contemptible. A suggestion of shame and remorse assailed him when he remembered the half-scornful way in which he had thought of her. The scorn was coming back on himself.

Mrs. Glenmure cast a glance round the room, and her eyes met Rafford's. She threw to him a languishing smile, half appealing, half commanding, full of intimate greeting.<sup>1</sup> Gladys saw it, and her breath was checked for a moment.

'Is she a great friend of yours?' she asked in a stinging tone.

'We used to be friends once. I have hardly seen her for the last year or two.'

'She looks as if she would like to get you back,' said Gladys, with an inflection in her voice that almost hurt him. She knew that it was hardly a fit remark to make, but the concentrated passion and bitterness of her soul wrung it from her.

At this moment Nigel Maystone entered the room, with the air of a man looking for something. Gladys sprang up and went to him.

'Is this our dance?' she asked.

'The last one was,' he answered, with a touch of reproach in his voice.

'Oh, I am so sorry. Won't this one do instead?'

There was no need to ask the question. In another minute they were in the ballroom, Maystone's face radiant with delight. His feet trod on air as they whirled round the room, and the waltz tune throbbed in his ears like heavenly music. That melody rocked and sang in his brain for many a year afterwards.

When it was over she professed to be hungry, and they went down to supper. For a long time they sat talking, and when she had finished eating she still showed no inclination to go. Maystone, for once in his life, tasted supreme happiness. The beauty of her face, the music of her voice, mesmerised him. The daintiness of her rich dress, the fragile delicacy of her gleaming throat and bosom and arms, seemed almost unreal. He could hardly believe that this magical figure was really for the moment a part of his dreary, unlovely life. His heart's cry of bitter rebellion turned into a song of joy.

Suddenly a stout, heavy-eyed young man stood before them.

'I've been looking for you everywhere, Miss Stour—what?' he said in a jerky voice. 'You have thrown me over twice—what?'

'Oh, Lord St. Pancras,' she exclaimed, 'I am so sorry! But it is so difficult to remember.'

'One does get rather muddled—what?' he replied with a sleepy smile. 'But come now, Miss Stour, won't you give me this dance to make up?—what?'

'I shall be very glad.'

She rose slowly, and with such evident reluctance that Maystone's regret was dashed with pleasure. Lord St. Pancras looked at the supper-tables.

'I haven't had any supper yet,' he said—'what?'

'Would you rather stay and have some now? We can have a dance later on instead.'

'No, thanks,' he replied, after a moment's mental struggle. 'I thought perhaps you might have liked some more—what?'

'No, thank you. I want to dance now.'

'Very well. We'll dance now, and I can just get a drink afterwards—what?' he replied, and they went out of the room, leaving Maystone to follow sadly.

Outside the supper-room they met Rafford. He asked Gladys for the next dance, almost with humility. She promised it, and went upstairs with her heart beating curiously.

Further on she passed Presterley, and he came forward to speak to her, regarding her with his usual dogged, immovable expression. She expected him to reproach her for her rupture of their engagement to dance, but he merely said—

'A little later on, when you are not so much engaged, perhaps you will give me a dance.'

Almost before she had time to give an affirmative reply,

he had withdrawn into the crowd again. Through the wild, reckless thoughts that were surging in her mind there came a slight sensation of shame. It really was rather mean of him not to show any sign of annoyance. This patient persistency was hard to fight against.

When the dance was finished, Lord St. Pancras, who was considerably overcome by the heat, led her down to the ground floor again, and they found a seat in a corridor which opened out of the hall, from the entrance to which they were hidden by a large palm.

Lord St. Pancras entered into a long and involved description of a dispute he had had with his coachman during the day. It was not a matter of the slightest interest, and indeed he himself appeared to be bored with it. But it gratified him to think that he was actually keeping up a conversation ; and Gladys was so much occupied with her own whirling thoughts, that she was thankful not to be called upon to do more than show an appearance of attention.

She felt as if the whole future of her life were in the balance that night. There was nothing tangible to indicate the fact, but her instincts told her that a supreme crisis had arrived.

A rustling figure came along the corridor. It was Mrs. Glenmure. The cloak upon her shoulders showed that she was about to depart. In the less brilliant light she looked far prettier than she had done in the glare upstairs. Though Gladys had not thought much of her previous intimacy with Rafford, it was rather a relief to see her go.

Just as she passed from sight behind the palm, Gladys heard her voice greeting some one.

'Oh, there you are,' she said ; 'I have been trying to speak to you all the evening, but you have fled from me as if I were the plague.'

'Indeed I haven't,' replied a man's voice. Gladys recognised Rafford's tones, and her heart scarcely beat as she listened. 'It is almost impossible to find any one in this crowd.'

'You haven't tried very hard. Why do you never come to see me now?'

'I have so little time. I have been working very hard all this summer.'

Mrs. Glenmure laughed scornfully.

'Your work wouldn't have stood in your way if you had wanted to see me.'

'Come, don't quarrel with me,' Rafford replied gently; 'I really have often wanted to see you. Come upstairs and have a little talk. You need not go just yet.'

'I *must* go, I'm tired to death, and I can't go and take off my cloak again. I tell you what—you shall see me home. Jack went away hours ago, so there will be room for you in the brougham, and I shan't have that horrid, lonely drive by myself.'

Her voice had become caressing in the last words. Gladys clenched her teeth.

'I am awfully sorry, but I can't go just yet,' Rafford answered. 'I am engaged for the next dance.'

'What on earth does that matter?'

'It matters a good deal,' he said decidedly.

'Of course, you can please yourself,' she said, in an injured tone. 'I should have thought you might have made that small sacrifice for the sake of an old friend. But old friends are soon superseded. I hope you'll enjoy your dance with the attractive unknown.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' he replied, with a shade of irresolution in his voice; 'it isn't anything of that sort, but I don't like to throw the girl over.'

'Oh, it's a girl, is it? Is she so very nice?'

'She is very nice. But, hang it, you needn't be so absurd about it. Can't you see that I ought not to go?'

'Dear me, how conscientious we have grown! I wonder if you would be so strict if you had only been engaged to dance with me.'

Her voice had become caressing again.

'Of course I should,' he answered; 'you know it well enough.'

'Then prove it by coming with me now,' she said, almost in a whisper, though Gladys heard every word. '*Do* come—I want so much to talk to you.'

'Very well,' said Rafford's voice, with a touch of softness in it; 'if you will wait half a minute, I'll get my hat and coat.'

Then they moved away into the hall.

Gladys turned to Lord St. Pancras, who was still droning on about his coachman.

'I think the music must have begun,' she said; 'we had better go upstairs.'

He looked at her with his sleepy eyes as they moved across the hall.

'I say,' he said, 'are you feeling faint? You're awfully white—what?'

'I'm perfectly well,' she replied, in a tone of irritation. But she staggered a little as she walked, and had to cling to his arm. On the stairs they met Presterley.

'When may I have that dance?' he asked slowly.

'Now, if you like,' she replied; and they went off together.



## CHAPTER VII

### SHAPED ENDS

THE next evening Rafford sat beside Mrs. Glenmure at her husband's dinner-table. It was more than a year since he had been inside the house, and he felt almost like a ghost returning to the scenes of its earthly life. Why he should feel that there was any change, he could scarcely tell; but the fact remained that something was very different.

Of course, Mrs. Glenmure was nothing in his life now, though once he had cared for her, after a fashion. But the change that he felt was in himself, and not in any outer circumstances.

He wondered if his nature were altering. The whole scene appeared to him at once ridiculous and pathetic. On the other side of his hostess was a good-looking young man, to whom she addressed nearly the whole of her conversation, turning towards him with attentive interest, looking into his eyes with languishing fervour, and speaking to him in tones so low that her remarks were lost in the general hum. Rafford watched her with a faint smile. It was not so very long ago since he had occupied the same place in her interest, and the languishing looks and the low, fervent tones had been poured as thickly on him. And before his day there had been others. And in the future there would be others again. The lights in the room were

all carefully shaded ; but still, as he watched her face, he could see that the wrinkles were a little deeper than they used to be, and the paint a little thicker. It seemed brutal to notice the fading charms of one who had, after a fashion, ruled his heart, even if it were only for a few short months. But, with an inclination to laugh struggling in his mind against a desire to turn away his head and rub tears out of his eyes, he could not feel otherwise than as the spectator of a bitter little comedy.

He looked down the table at Jack Glenmure, already half fuddled with his own champagne, engaged also in loverlike converse with another dyed and painted lady by his side, his bloated face and bleared eyes making the spectacle alike comic and disgusting. Similar people and similar scenes ran down both sides of the table. There was scarcely a woman there whose reputation was not a little tarnished.

Most of the small party had a rakish, night-bird look. Once Rafford had thought these people amusing, and had noticed nothing revolting in their appearance. To-night their looks disgusted and their conversation bored him.

Being in this moralising vein, he thought of Mrs. Glenmure's future, of the ghastly fight against Time's ravaging hand, of the hideous false youth painted over the mouldering ruins of age. She had not come anywhere near that sort of thing yet, but in the distance it seemed inevitable. Vanity was her one ruling passion in life. There was nothing she would not sacrifice, perhaps *had* not sacrificed, to it. When all that could help her to feed it was dead, what was there left ?

But if it came to that, was not he in much the same boat with her, and was his old age likely to be more beautiful ?

His moralisings were beginning to be disagreeable to him, and he shifted his attention to dinner and champagne,

which were excellent. No one took much notice of him. Mrs. Glenmure occasionally turned to dart an eloquent smile at him, and a chance remark, before bending once more towards her younger swain. The lady on his other hand was not attractive; and as she was deeply engrossed in a financial conversation with her further neighbour—a retired dragoon, who was now a company promoter—he left her in peace. It seemed to him that dinner was an unusually long performance.

When the ladies had departed, Glenmure, who had long given up all pretence of objecting to his wife's admirers—finding them indeed a convenient cover for his own amusements—came to Rafford's end of the table, and regaled him with Rabelaisian anecdotes. They were more coarse than funny at the best of times; and as he was now too drunk to remember them correctly, or recount them coherently, Rafford's disgust and weariness increased rapidly. Gladys Stour's raptures over third-rate novels and tea-party songs might have bored him a little once or twice; but how infinitely better they were than this sort of thing!

His mind took refuge in the thought of her, contrasting her atmosphere with this. Certainly he must be getting old, or he would never have been in such a serious mood.

He made his escape early. Mrs. Glenmure tried to talk to him after dinner, but somehow they seemed to find very little to say. At the best of times they had chiefly relied upon the discussion of mutual amusements for conversation; and now when they had seen nothing of each other for so long, the bare account of suppers at the Savoy and dinners at Hurlingham seemed rather empty. Rafford saw that his hostess was relieved when he wished her good-night. With a last languishing smile she said—

‘Why have you grown so serious? Have you turned

good? Are you shocked at all of us naughty people? You used to be amusing once, but you aren't now.'

'It is only the effect of contrast,' he replied. 'I am bound to appear stupid among such wits. Give me a duller setting, and I shall shine.'

He looked at the company with a scornful smile as he spoke. They were gathered round the ex-dragoon, who was giving a very poor imitation of a low-class music-hall singer, an imitation which reproduced and exaggerated the vulgarity of the original, and entirely left out the very slight modicum of humour. It was received with shouts of laughter and applause.

Mrs. Glenmure took his words literally, and smiled a pleased farewell as he moved away towards the door. He was glad to get out into the street and to let the cool night breeze blow the smell of patchouli and cigarette smoke from his nostrils. The company he had left began to discuss him, and to wonder why he had grown so dull and grave. They noticed that he had never even smiled at the military financier's song.

As he walked along Piccadilly, where the thick, motionless foliage of the trees looked sham and theatrical in the gaslight, and the faded smiles of heavily rouged women sent a pathetic thrill into his heart, he was oppressed by a sense of the falseness of life. His over-tired taste had a passing inclination towards freshness and simplicity and health. He was no hypocrite, and did not imagine himself to be shocked by the scene he had left—a scene in which he had often found amusement. But poor, vain, silly Mrs. Glenmure looked to him a mournful figure. He had little sympathy with the world's conventional ideals; but still it seemed obvious that, on the whole, it was better for women not to tread the path that led to such a result.

Then the idea came back to him which had often arisen

before—that if Gladys Stour married Presterley, she was likely enough to drift into the same sea. He knew her nature well, and realised more or less what she expected of life. If she found herself irretrievably tied to a dull sot, who could not appreciate one of her qualities or sympathise with any of her ideas, was it not probable that sooner or later her high-strung, passionate nature would rebel to some purpose? Whether the world's ideas were right or wrong, the world was stronger than any individual. And the world had decreed that rebellious wives should almost surely be merged in the class with which he had just been associating. Some people might think it the pleasantest and most amusing class to belong to. But in his present mood that was not his opinion.

He felt that he had some responsibility in the matter. It was not merely vanity which told him that she was in love with him. Honestly he could acquit himself of all desire or attempt to bring about such a result. But the result had come ; and even supposing that nothing he could have done would have prevented it, he was still face to face with the question of how far he was bound to try to mitigate its effects.

His imagination pictured the two alternatives. The first, to leave her to chance. The other, to ask her to marry him ; and if, as was almost certain, she consented, to make out life for both of them in the best possible way. She would be a very desirable wife. If he *was* to marry without the absolute self-surrender of passion, which seemed now an impossible dream, he could hardly find any one with whom his chances of happiness would be greater. And on her side she would at least have a decent chance. He did not regard himself as a very desirable husband. But he believed greatly in the power of love ; and if she really cared for him, her happiness would be less affected by his numerous short-

comings than by the undesired perfection of any other husband.

The dilemma had its humorous side, and he was a good deal amused at having to take such a position so seriously. But he felt that it *was* serious; and by the time he reached the door of his club, he had made up his mind to ask Gladys Stour to be his wife, with feelings curiously compounded of satisfaction and regret.

In the club he met Walter Flaire, full of news. After retailing sundry gossip, which Rafford had to listen to with patience, he suddenly fired a carefully prepared shot.

'Of course you have heard of Miss Stour's engagement?' he said.

He looked searchingly at Rafford's face, but gained nothing. Rafford replied carelessly—

'Oh, is she engaged? Who is the man?'

'Herbert Presterley. He proposed to her at Bloomshire House last night, and she accepted him. Lady Maria has just been telling me all about it.'

'I must write and congratulate her,' Rafford remarked in the same indifferent tone, and moved away towards a writing-table. He hardly knew whether he was glad or sorry. In a way it was a relief—and yet he felt rather as if some one had hit him.

He found it too difficult to write now, and turned to leave the club. In the hall he met young Lord St. Pancras, who approached him with the important air begotten of the pride of conscious naughtiness.

'Oh, Rafford,' he said, 'do come and have some supper in my rooms. I have got some chorus-girls from the Frivolity coming, and two or three men. We mean to have a great night—what?'

Rafford regarded him solemnly.

'Young man,' he replied, 'people say that there is a fate

in these things. To disprove the statement, instead of accepting your tempting invitation I shall go home to bed. Many thanks, all the same.'

He passed out into the street, leaving the gaping young man to wonder what on earth he had meant.

# BOOK III





## CHAPTER I

### A SERIOUS FAMILY

THOUGH Nigel Maystone's intercourse with Miss Stour had been too free from self-deception to allow him to hope for any other result, nevertheless the announcement of her engagement to Presterley was a heavy stroke. In spite of the pain of hopeless love, the last five or six weeks had been a very happy time for him. Now that it was ended he realised its full value. The dream had melted, the holiday was dead. In the future he had nothing to look for except the not too lovely realities of life, unbrightened by the glamour which had covered them for a time.

But if his heart was heavy, his conscience became lighter. Though he had truly enjoyed his brief excursion in the bright, artificial side of existence, he had felt that his proper place was amongst the darker actualities. Through all his enjoyment he had heard the voices of human misery and pain calling to him. His ambition had slumbered uneasily. Now he returned to his old mental habits, resolved not to allow them to be interrupted again.

As humour was not his strong point, it did not occur to him that his serious view of his mission was at present rather comic. He was so full of enthusiasm and high resolves, that he forgot the fact that he had not yet advanced a step towards carrying any of them out. As far as anything practical went, his influence on the world at large was apparently non-existent.

In fact, he was in something of a dilemma. Intellectually, he was unable to convince himself of the truth of ultra-socialistic doctrines. But the extreme Socialists appeared to be the only people whose aims were sufficiently revolutionary to satisfy him. He had vague ideas of starting a propaganda of his own. But he confessed that a party which consisted solely of himself would hardly attain to great importance; and he was unlikely to find disciples.

He was possessed of an impulsive and rather pugnacious nature, and of a cautious and analytical brain; a combination calculated to lead to indecision.

His friend Batton, as previously stated, was a slave to the fascinations of a certain Miss Chilvey, and in due course he introduced Maystone to the society of that young lady and her family. In consequence of his friend's frequent lamentations over the bitter lot of his beloved, Maystone had expected to find her a meek and pathetic creature, crushed by the weary monotony of her daily labour. He was surprised, therefore, to discover that she was a robust and rather good-looking young woman, over thirty years of age, with a keen intellect and considerable decision of character, but a slightly hysterical nervous organisation. Like Batton, she was an ardent Socialist, and was in consequence engaged in chronic warfare with her father.

Mr. Chilvey was a stout, plain, yellow-faced man, with a rasping voice and a somewhat magisterial method of speaking. By profession he was secretary to one or two small charitable associations, which yielded him a rather diminutive income. He was the son of a tradesman, and had been educated at inferior schools, but by industry and perseverance had succeeded in acquiring a fund of learning which would have shamed many a man of equal ability to whom the great centres of education had all been open. Political economy was his one passion. He was a fierce Radical of

the old kind, a pronounced individualist and advocate of the doctrine of *laissez-faire*. He had a fine contempt for every one and everything except Adam Smith and John Stuart Mill. The former he regarded as a great teacher; the latter as the type of earthly perfection. If religion of any kind had been possible to his nature, he would have built an altar to the writer of the treatise on 'Liberty.'

He lived in a small, semi-detached villa near Blackheath, and on the occasion of Maystone's first visit they found him seated in his little garden, looking over the proof-sheets of an article which he had written to elucidate and criticise the theory of Rent. When Maystone was introduced, he thrust his square chin forward, and regarded him fiercely with round, hard little eyes, his snub nose twitching contemptuously.

'How d'ye do, Mr. Maystone?' he remarked, without attempting to rise or shake hands; 'I suppose you are one of Tom's Socialist friends—a comrade, perhaps, I ought to call you.'

'I am afraid I am rather a person without a creed at present,' replied Maystone. 'I am much dissatisfied with the present conditions of society; but I have not quite made up my mind if I believe in Socialism as a solution of the case.'

'Then the sooner you make it up the better,' replied Mr. Chilvey shortly, and returned to his proof-sheets.

'It's not so easy to make up one's mind on these subjects if one is conscientious about them,' Maystone answered defiantly. He was annoyed at being spoken to in this way. Mr. Chilvey looked up from his papers.

'My dear sir,' he said in slow and scornful tones, 'the matter lies in a nutshell. The question simply is, Will you be governed by sentiment or by reason? Man in the concrete is full of sentiment. But we have to deal with the economic man. That's my point.'

'It's all very well to talk like that, but who the deuce *is* the economic man?' broke in Batton angrily. Mr. Chilvey regarded him with benevolent disdain. Then he gently laid aside his papers, and began to lecture. He spoke on the subject of the economic man for at least a quarter of an hour, in a calm, lucid, half-contemptuous manner. Batton writhed with excitement, and every now and then endeavoured to interrupt for the purpose of disputing some statement, but in vain. Though Mr. Chilvey never appeared to raise his harsh voice, its grating tones seemed to saw their way through all opposition. Batton was compelled to wait till he had done. Then he broke forth—

'It is the existence of men like you that is holding us back now. You are the worst enemies of progress. Everything with you is a matter of calculation and abstract thought. You can't grasp the realities of life. You act on us, who are trying to reform the world, like cold water.'

'Cold water is the best remedy for hysteria,' remarked Mr. Chilvey calmly.

'You make no allowance for human feelings or human hearts,' pursued Batton furiously. 'I believe you have no hearts at all—nothing but brains.'

'No one will ever bring the latter accusation against you,' replied Mr. Chilvey. 'But I fancy Gertrude has just come back. You had better go indoors and talk to her. I'm busy.'

With a contemptuous grunt he turned his back on both of them and bent over his papers again. Maystone reflected that he had come into rather a happy family. He followed Batton towards the house.

He was introduced to Mrs. Chilvey, a timid, faded little woman, with some traces of former prettiness. She greeted him apologetically, and hoped he had not found the train very crowded when he came down. Her tone seemed to imply that she would expect to be blamed if he had.

'It really is very shameful,' she said, 'that they should crowd the trains in the way they do. Mr. Chilvey has complained once or twice ; but even that has had no effect.'

That the officials should have been deaf to the voice of Mr. Chilvey seemed to her to border on the incredible.

'The railways ought to be in the hands of the State,' Batton remarked ; 'we are at the mercy of the capitalists who are concerned in them. What does the discomfort of the passengers matter so long as the shareholders get their dividends?' he asked with irony. Mr. Chilvey, who had just entered the room, overheard him.

'That old parrot-cry,' he remarked scornfully. Then he treated them to a discourse on the benefits of competition, which was only interrupted by the entrance of his daughter. She bestowed a chaste kiss on Batton, and shook hands with Maystone.

'I have been insulted !' she said in an agitated tone.

'My darling !' exclaimed Batton. 'Who was the ruffian ?' He clenched his fists and endeavoured to shape his mild features into a fierce expression. Miss Chilvey, who was a head taller than he was, looked down at him calmly.

'Promise me you will do nothing rash if I tell you about it,' she said. 'After all, we must reserve our energies for fighting the battles of the community, and ignore the individual.'

'Yes, I suppose you are right,' he answered regretfully. 'But I should have liked to punch the fellow's head.'

He was a little over five feet high, and not of an athletic build, so that he was not altogether sorry that revenge was thus forbidden by principle.

'What has happened, Gertrude?' asked Mr. Chilvey, who had listened to the discourse of the lovers with an unsympathetic smile.

'Well, what happened was this,' said Miss Chilvey. 'I

was looking out for a place in the train at Cannon Street—it was very crowded——’

‘Ah!’ said Mrs Chilvey, with much meaning in her tone, and nodded her head. The one fact she had grasped in life was that trains were always too full.

‘I was just getting into a third-class carriage,’ Miss Chilvey went on, ‘when a man whom I had never seen before came up and took off his hat.’

She paused, and Batton muttered, ‘I wish I had been there.’

‘He said to me, “There is lots of room in the next first-class carriage, and I have bribed the guard to keep two seats for me? Won’t you come in there? I shall be delighted to pay the difference.” Of course I declined the offer with indignation. In fact, I am afraid I was excited. But my vehemence attracted attention, and he thought it best to retire. When I got out at the station here, he got out too, and followed me. It took at least five minutes to shake him off. It is disgraceful that an unprotected woman should be persecuted in that way.’

‘I think it was rather a compliment, dear, wasn’t it?’ said Mrs. Chilvey nervously.

‘A compliment! Yes, if the notions of the Turk are still to regulate the treatment of women in this country,’ replied Miss Chilvey. Mrs. Chilvey, whose position in the household was that of an inferior kind of housekeeper, would probably have been happier in a harem.

‘What sort of man did he look?’ asked Batton.

‘Oh, I suppose he would have called himself a gentleman. He spoke like an educated man, and he was dressed in clothes of the most fashionable cut. His fingers were smothered in rings, and he had a gold watch-chain. Worthless creatures of that sort spend enough on their own adornment to clothe the whole of a working-class family.’

'When your Socialistic Utopia is brought about, no doubt you will revive the Sumptuary Laws, and decide how we are all to dress,' remarked Mr. Chilvey.

Miss Chilvey replied with a contemptuous smile, which caused her father's face to turn orange with anger.

'I daresay the money they spend is good for trade,' remarked Mrs. Chilvey in her timid voice. This gave Mr. Chilvey a chance of revenging himself on some one, and he descended upon her fiercely with a lecture on what he called the 'Millite paradox.'

Miss Chilvey showed her contempt for both her parents by going to the window and gazing into the street while the lecture proceeded. She drummed noisily on the window-pane with her fingers. This unfilial conduct brought its own retribution, for a man who was passing was attracted by the sound, and looked up at her. To her horror she recognised her persecutor of the railway station. He not unnaturally thought that she was trying to attract his attention, and responded by kissing his hand to her.

'Good gracious!' she exclaimed, 'there the brute is.'

Batton and Maystone rushed to her side, and Batton furiously shook his fist at the man, who regarded him at first with astonishment, and then with amused contempt. He was turning away carelessly when he caught sight of Maystone's face. He stopped and threw him an insolent glance of recognition.

'Why, do you know him?' asked Miss Chilvey in surprise.

'He is my employer,' Maystone replied in some confusion. It was Mr. Prowse.

'Then I can only say that I don't see how you can work for such a creature and preserve your self-respect,' she remarked coldly, and turned away. Considering how



cordially Maystone disliked Mr. Prowse, he felt this to be rather hard.

‘One can’t choose one’s fate,’ he said in an aggrieved tone. ‘I have to earn my living.’

She looked searchingly at him with her clear grey eyes. In spite of the want of softness in her manners, he could not help feeling that she was an attractive woman, and he was peculiarly susceptible to female influence. He did not like her to disapprove of him.

‘Are you quite sure that you are speaking conscientiously?’ she asked; ‘it is so easy to believe the pleasantest thing. I expect that what you earn goes in luxury and amusement. You could *live* without it.’

He did not feel sure that this accusation was absolutely false from her point of view, though he hardly considered that there was much luxury or amusement in his life.

‘I suppose I could keep alive,’ he said, ‘if I chose to do nothing. My father would have to keep me. But he is not a rich man, and I shouldn’t feel justified in asking him to pay that I might live in idleness.’

‘Oh, of course not,’ she said, ‘but there is no need to be idle. There is plenty of work to do in spreading the truth. It would be quite legitimate to make your father keep you if you were doing that. It would only mean cutting off some of *his* luxuries. Why not give up your present work and devote yourself to the cause of social reform? You are just the sort of man for it. You have education, and I believe you have enthusiasm.’

‘And probably he has some common-sense, and won’t want to do anything that would help to enslave the world as you would like it to be enslaved,’ broke in Mr. Chilvey. ‘You had better leave off talking nonsense and come and have some tea.’

The family meal had been prepared, for they were in

the dining-room, the Chilveys' drawing-room being kept entirely for the reception of visitors on state occasions. Mr. Chilvey, with his spoon standing upright in a large cup of tea, from which he noisily drank at intervals, was playing havoc with some cold beef. It was a sultry evening, and from time to time he stopped eating to wipe his brow with the napkin which he had tucked under his chin.

His manners and appearance and the tone in which he habitually spoke were rousing a fiercely contradictory spirit in Maystone's breast. An ounce of prejudice is worth a pound of reason in any argument, and he began to feel that Miss Chilvey's remarks were decidedly convincing.

'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Socialist,' he remarked to her. As she had as yet advanced no arguments in favour of Socialism, she felt that he was a most sympathetic young man, and smiled upon him with her handsome eyes. Of course he knew that she belonged to Batton; but, still, female eyes always carried a species of intoxication in them. They remained for some time by the window, engaged in confidential conversation. Maystone's heart was still entirely occupied with Gladys Stour, and he had not the slightest idea of making love to Miss Chilvey, even apart from the fact that she was engaged to Batton. But he found her unexpectedly sympathetic to him, and when they at last joined the rest of the party at the tea-table his mind was swaying under her influence.

Batton was anything but pleased, and regarded his unconsciously offending friend with gloomy eyes. Miss Chilvey noticed this, and accordingly ignored him entirely, devoting much attention to the stranger. As she was incapable of feeling passion, and her choice of Batton was entirely based on intellectual sympathy, she would willingly have replaced him by Maystone if she found his mental

attainments more satisfying. Batton vaguely understood this, and his uneasiness was not without cause.

When they were returning to London that night he would hardly speak to Maystone, who never thought of the true reason of his silence. Almost the only remark he made carried an intended sting.

'I saw Dick Rennett the other night,' he said, 'and told him that I was really hoping to enroll you as a recruit. He said that the movement was already sufficiently hampered by people of your stamp, and that if you tried to meddle in the affairs of the workers he would do his best to put a spoke in your wheel. As he is beginning to get noticed by the leaders, and is likely to take rather a prominent place before long, I advise you to avoid him as much as possible.'

The tone in which this was said made Maystone wonder if the heat had not been too much for his usually amiable little friend.

## CHAPTER II

### MAYSTONE'S HOLIDAY

**THE** weeks dragged on wearily. The London season drew towards its end ; but as Maystone had entirely shunned society since Gladys Stour's engagement, this affected him little. By dint of much rigid economy, and even of privation, he managed to buy her a wedding present, which he sent, accompanied by a note of congratulation in such falsely exaggerated terms that for the first time she began to suspect the depth of his feeling for her. Her mood of angry defiance against the world was for a moment broken down, and she wrote to thank him with eyes so full of tears that her writing was almost illegible.

Her letter was treasured by Maystone in the traditional manner of forlorn lovers.

She had insisted on a quiet wedding, and it was fixed to take place in London towards the end of August, when the town would be empty of all but the insignificant majority of its inhabitants. Maystone was glad to hear this. He would be away for his brief holiday at the time, and would see and hear nothing of it.

Towards this holiday he was looking forward with mingled feelings. The thought of escaping, for however short a time, from the dingy office and the uncongenial companionship there, was exhilarating. He was already tired of the darkness and rush and noise of London, and longed for the pure air and the quiet of the country. But, on the other hand, he

could not look forward with very great zest to a *l'le-à-l'le* residence alone with his father, who would be bored to death with him. They had few neighbours at Marchfont in whom Nigel was interested, and the best he could hope for would be to loaf about the not very attractive country by himself, and occasionally try to catch a trout. It would be better than London, but not very exciting.

But his plans were changed for the better. Charlie Rafford wrote to say that he was going to spend some weeks at a small watering-place on the south coast, amusing himself with a sailing-boat which a friend had lent him. Would Maystone come and stay as his guest for as long as he could? The invitation was accepted with cordial gratitude.

The intervening time passed without incident, and Maystone found himself installed in an old-fashioned hotel in the little town of Stainmouth. It was a delight to him to be in a clean country bedroom again, with the white muslin curtains screening the morning sun, as they waved across the open window, through which came the endless sobbing of the sea. Morning after morning he rose, with a light-heartedness such as he had not felt for months, and hastened to look out of the window into the land-locked harbour, where the waves were dancing and tossing the anchored boats about under a cloudy sky, or glittering calmly in unblemished sunshine, or lying hidden under a grey fog which came rolling up on to the land like steam. It was an unfashionable place, and, except for a few retired soldiers and sailors and other watering-place nondescripts, there was no society. Neither Maystone nor Rafford was very fond of making acquaintance with strangers—Maystone being too shy, and Rafford too much afraid of finding them wearisome—and consequently they spent most of their time alone together.

The boat was a thing of beauty and delight. A taciturn

boatman was the whole of their crew, and they spent day after day on the water, their white sails gleaming against the background of blue, and the sea-gulls dipping and screaming across their track. The weather on the whole was superb, and the sunshine held them in a trance of lazy content as their boat crept out past the brown cliffs fringed with pale-green grass, or rocked as if in slumber on the bosom of the bay, while they lounged in the stern, watching the white houses and rusty, smoke-topped roofs, and, beyond, the great, bare, rolling downs and the dark patches of woodland creeping up their sides. In such a scene the dullest mind would have been elevated and purified; and while Maystone experienced the raptures of a fresh and simple heart, not yet deeply stained by the dark currents of earthly experience, Rafford's more sombre and time-worn personality was almost equally illuminated and transfigured.

Rafford knew instinctively that when once you begin to think seriously of anything in life, you have laid a yoke on your shoulders from which you can never again escape. Hitherto he had looked on the world as his playground, and had taken without question any gifts which the gods had chanced to throw in his way. Within the wide bounds which a worldly code of honour imposes, he had set himself to enjoy life, and in a sense he had succeeded to an unusual extent. His vitality had carried him on like a stream. But under all his reckless, careless moods there had lain a dim suggestion of melancholy and dissatisfaction. His nature was always demanding more than it had got. He was a clever man, with an active brain, and it wanted something harder to bite than he had given to it.

The necessary impulse to thought had come in the mental struggle which he had gone through with regard to Gladys Stour. For almost the first time in his life he had been in a prolonged state of indecision. Even now he was not

certain of his feelings with regard to her. He had realised a new sensation—that of responsibility towards another human being beyond that which the world's code exacted. He was disturbed, and hardly felt sure of himself. The whole of his previous attitude towards life seemed to be on its trial.

He was not the man to waste much time in vain regrets. What was done was done. He had lived his life freely, according to his own choice, and, whatever happened, he would not sit down to wish the past unrecorded. But new thoughts and new ambitions were beginning to stir in him. He felt that life in the future would have to give him something more than mere amusement.

The change was noticeable. He who had been the rowdiest man of his generation at Oxford, who had carried his undergraduate spirit through the great world, was content now to spend weeks in a quiet country town, with no companion except an inexperienced young enthusiast of a serious cast of mind. The half-sad, half-scoffing spirit, which was always alive in him, led him to wonder vaguely if he were adopting the view of life held by his companion. Was this seriousness infectious? It was hard to understand that he should not feel the checks imposed by such society. For Maystone's ideas of life were so virginal and untainted, that Rafford instinctively restrained himself in his conversation with him almost as much as if he had been a girl. Maystone's views on all subjects were revolutionary. But there was a fund of enthusiasm in him, an entire absence of all disillusionment, that made him shrink with horror from ordinary sensualism and cynical coarseness. Rafford saw and respected this. He could hardly lay claim to the same views on the subject, and yet somewhere at the back of his mind there seemed to be a faint reflection of them.

'I suppose you think that all women are angels,' he said one day, as they lolled in the boat under a noonday sun.

'I think they are made of finer stuff than we are,' Maystone answered; 'don't you?'

'Yes—perhaps—I am not sure. The stuff so often seems the worse for wear.'

'It is generally our fault.'

'Not always. We don't make women vain. And a woman's vanity is sometimes a harder and crueller and more terrible thing than all our coarseness and animalism. As we were made animals, we can hardly be blamed if we *are* animals; or, at any rate, Nature doesn't get off scot-free, if there *is* any blame in the matter. But vanity of that diabolical kind is impossible to a mere animal; it is a perversion of the diviner part in humanity—and that seems to me a far greater treason. But in these days only the flesh is in bad repute; the world and the devil are in high favour.'

'I think the flesh is the most contemptible of the trio.'

'Perhaps so,' Rafford replied, rather mournfully. 'I can't help wishing sometimes that I had lived in another age, when mere physical sensations were the most important things in life. The game is too complex now, and I wasn't made to play it properly. I ought to have been a buccaneer or some other simple-minded sort of blackguard. I am out of place in these highly artificial days.'

Rafford so seldom spoke of himself, except in jest, that Maystone regarded him with some astonishment. He was gazing across the sea with a wistful look on his strong brown face, as if he were vainly trying to see into the hidden depths beyond the horizon. But the breeze was freshening, and a word from Ben the boatman recalled him to practical matters, and he laughed with a touch of boyish shyness as he grasped the tiller more firmly and



turned the boat's head out to sea. Maystone, who, in spite of the ardent affection with which he regarded the older man, generally felt a little in awe of his vigorous, keen mind, was surprised at these slight symptoms of weakness. But Rafford was always treading down the softer side of his own nature, and did not again revert to the topic which had led him into this unusual exposure of his feelings.

That day they sailed further out into the Channel than they had ever done before. The weather was fine, but the wind increased rather than diminished, and during the afternoon the sky began to take a more threatening appearance. Ben hinted at the advisability of returning, but Rafford was in a thoughtful, abstracted mood, and scarcely heeded his remark. When at last he put about and started on the homeward voyage, ugly clouds were sweeping up overhead, and the waves were tossing white manes of foam. The wind still increased, and the little boat began to stagger with repeated shocks as she leaped at the waves in her path. She was quite unfitted for such a heavy sea, and before long Maystone realised that they were in considerable danger. He was miserably sea-sick, and soaked to the skin by the masses of spray which burst over them; but he was no coward, and sat quiet and composed, except when it was necessary to assist Ben, whose face betokened a certain amount of anxiety. Rafford seemed actually to enjoy the danger. He steered skilfully through the turbulent mass of frothy green water, occasionally smiling as if in defiance when a loftier wave lifted its glistening wall in front of them. At last they ran under the shelter of the great headland which screened the harbour, and the waves became smaller. He turned to Maystone with a smile.

'You don't want for pluck, old chap,' he said.

Maystone felt a glow of pleasure at this praise, coming

from a man to whom he had always unconsciously looked up as stronger than himself.

'I felt too ill to mind what happened much,' he answered ; 'it wasn't pluck.'

'I'd rather form my own opinion on that subject. By Jove ! it was a pretty tight squeeze. We weren't very far from solving the great mystery. If it hadn't been for you and Ben, I should almost have wished to do it.'

Maystone said nothing, feeling, indeed, rather disinclined for conversation, and looking forward to soon setting foot on an element which would not roll his internal organs about in this painful manner. He was puzzled to account for Rafford's mood.

When at last they were safe ashore, Rafford gravely apologised to Ben for having risked his life. The man stared at him in some astonishment, and then responded awkwardly—

'I don't care where I goes along of *you*, sir,' after which he hastily filled his pipe and puffed at it with unnecessary vehemence, noisily clicking his lips on the stem. He appeared to be thinking deeply.

Henceforward he preserved a romantic devotion for 'the Honourable Rafford,' as he always insisted on calling him.

But even the most ardent optimist will allow that pleasant things must have their end, and but few days remained to Maystone of his holiday. The prospect of returning to dusty, jaded, deserted London began to grow very definite. Rafford, who was going off on a round of shooting visits, pitied him sincerely. But there was no help for it.

A day or two before their departure, instead of sailing, they hired some horses in the town and went for a ride on the downs. There had been a sea-fog all morning ; and as there was no wind, and the fog might return at any moment,

they had thought it best to amuse themselves in this way on shore, though the hard, sun-baked turf was not in the best of conditions for galloping, even on a hireling hack.

Maystone's horse had the hardest possible mouth, and his arms ached with holding the brute ; Rafford's, on the other hand, showed a decided tendency to go to sleep in whatever position it happened to find itself. However, they were in good spirits, and had not expected much of their mounts ; consequently, they rode along happily enough, rather amused than otherwise by the peculiarities of the animals.

They were just at the end of August, and the country was in the fullest luxuriance of its beauty. Brambles covered with half-ripe blackberries drooped amongst the tangled grasses on the banks, and honeysuckles clambered over the dusty hedges. The harvest was not all gathered in, and the rattle of reaping-machines came faintly from distant fields, where long rows of golden-brown corn, mingled with flaming poppies, were falling before the destroyer. From time to time the bellowing voices of the labourers proclaimed the pursuit of an unfortunate rabbit, driven from his playground amongst the wheat. The birds were hushed, and the dense, solid-looking foliage of the trees hung without motion in the sultry air.

As they passed beyond the more cultivated country and began to ascend the steeper slopes of the wild downs, the landscape broadened around them. Vast stretches of brown upland spread away to the horizon, the hills taking every possible shape and curved outline, with white farms half hidden amongst the dark trees clustered in the little valleys that dented their sides, like arms of the sea on a hilly coast. Indeed, the character of the country extended actually to the sea, and the same brown hills stretched out like great sleeping monsters into the glittering expanse of

water, where the fog had finally dissolved, and the sun was stooping towards the gleaming rim of the horizon.

They rode on as the day drew towards its end, while the shadows lengthened, and the valleys grew dark and quiet, and the distant contours became blurred and undefined. In the wildest part of the district they came upon a small white country house, nestling under the shadow of a circle of hills, and half hidden by the irregular arms of a dense wood. Rafford checked his horse, and looked about him.

'By Jove!' he said, 'it's old Caverton's place. I remember coming to shoot here ever so many years ago, when I was staying with the Fanchesters, over the other side of Stainmouth. I wonder if the old chap is here. We'll go and look him up if he is. He's such a nice old boy.'

They rode down a lane towards the little white lodge which terminated an avenue of oaks. An ancient rustic was working in the ditch close to the gate. Rafford accosted him.

'Do you know if Captain Caverton is up at the house?' he asked.

The rustic regarded him with expressionless eyes.

'No,' he said, 'the Captain be not at the house.'

'Is any one there?'

'Likely enough. He has lent it to some friends of his, but I don't know who they be.'

He resumed his digging with the air of a man who did not intend to be cross-examined further. Rafford and Maystone rode slowly on, taking stock of the little domain over the hedge. The sound of wheels attracted their attention, and they saw a dogcart coming rapidly towards the lodge, under the oak-tree avenue. It passed through the gate and turned on to the road to follow them. They drew their horses to one side to let it pass, but a sudden

exclamation in a female voice caused them both to look round hastily. The dogcart contained Herbert Presterley and Gladys.

Gladys turned in her seat and stared at them with astonished eyes. She seemed dazed by this unexpected encounter, and made no sign of greeting, but there was a look in her face that startled them. It was almost as if she had seen a ghost. Presterley took no notice of them at all, but whipped up his horse; and before they had time to realise what had happened, the dogcart had turned a corner and was out of sight.

'I suppose they are here for their honeymoon,' said Rafford, in a matter-of-fact voice which scarcely reflected his feelings.

'My God!' exclaimed Maystone in broken tones, 'did you see her face?'

Rafford looked at him in some surprise.

'She doesn't look as if she were enjoying the companionship of that damned clodhopper,' he answered savagely; 'but what could she expect?'

'Oh, it's too awful,' Maystone murmured feebly; 'if *anything* could have saved her from it!'

'What!' said Rafford. 'Why—good Lord!—were *you* in love with her too?'

Maystone made no answer, and looked away. Rafford muttered 'Poor devil!' in a low tone, with a little hard laugh. But he was not very much amused.

## CHAPTER III

### TRIAL BY BATTLE

FOR one reason or another, Maystone had hardly seen Mr. Prowse since the adventure in the Chilvey mansion, and when he returned to London from Stainmouth the amorous stockbroker was still away on his holiday. But he had evidently mentioned the subject to his faithful sycophant Jones, as that attractive youth constantly threw out playful hints on the subject.

'Well, Maystone,' he remarked one day, 'did you take that gurl away with you for your holiday?'

'What girl?' Maystone asked, endeavouring to repress his irritation.

'Oh, Gawd bless me, as if you didn't know what I mean! I've heard of your goings on, though you *do* play the virtuous and respectable so prettily when you're here. You're a sly dog, you are!'

This latter remark was really intended as a compliment, but it infuriated Maystone.

'I suppose to your chivalrous mind the idea of any woman being the friend of a man, and retaining her virtue and self-respect, is ridiculous,' he said.

'I should certainly say it was ridiculous of the man,' answered this would-be Lothario, with a laugh of scorn; 'but I daresay there *are* men like that. I am afraid *I* should find the situation rather too tempting. But then I like temptation,' he added with a snigger.

As in features he closely resembled a pig, his love of temptation must usually have been unrequited.

In this society Maystone's days were passed through a dreary September. His only change from the stuffy, dingy office was to the deserted West End, where the tenantless houses looked like haggard faces with blind eyes, and life seemed to have fled from the grey, half-empty streets, while the parks were a wilderness of brown turf scarred with dusty, bare patches, and black trees already losing their faded, dirty leaves. He was homesick for the sea and the harvest-fields and the wild, lonely downs.

Except Batton, he had scarcely a companion, and even that individual did not seem to seek his company so frequently as before. He did not again offer to take Maystone to visit the Chilveys; and in the circumstances Maystone hardly liked to go on his own account, though he would have been glad of some more counsel from Miss Chilvey. She was the first person he had met who was sufficiently interested in him to give advice that at all fitted in with his own views; and as he was in very considerable perplexity as to his future, advice would have helped him much.

He felt that he could not endure his present life much longer, and also he was determined to endeavour to begin some active step towards the work on which his tastes were set. Though he could not absolutely accept the Socialist programme, he believed it possible that he might work in harmony with the advanced and 'progressive' party. Being a man of education, they would surely welcome him as an ally.

Batton introduced him to some of the leading Socialists; and as his ardour for reform was evident, while he discreetly concealed the misgivings with which, in spite of

himself, he regarded many of their theories and methods, he found them ready to allow him to attend meetings promoted by them, and once or twice to try his oratorical powers. But the Mirabeau illusion was sadly dispelled. He found that instead of stepping into the position of a natural leader of the people, an important recruit from the hostile camp, he was merely regarded with tolerance, and occasionally with something akin to contempt. Apart from his personal value, there were too many men thirsting for distinction already to allow him to take a place anywhere except at the bottom of the ladder. And in addition to this, he had the mortification of finding that his own powers were either less developed or less adaptable than he had imagined. His speeches did not satisfy himself, and roused absolutely no enthusiasm in his audiences. Indeed, they expected much stronger meat than his views would allow him to give them; and had his rhetorical powers been far greater than they were, he would still have excited little interest.

But the hopefulness of youth and the earnestness of his ambition prevented his despairing of ultimate success. He felt, however, that if he was to have a chance of obtaining any sort of influence, he must be able to devote far more time to the work than he could possibly do at present.

Once only he encountered Dick Rennett. That fiery person was rapidly becoming prominent in the front rank of the advanced wing. He regarded Maystone's tepid revolutionary notions with absolute scorn; and, in addition, his feelings towards him appeared to be a curious compound of class hatred and unreasoning personal animosity. Maystone endeavoured to be conciliatory, but nothing could modify Rennett's blind dislike, for which he himself could hardly have accounted. Maystone was his Dr. Fell.



Altogether Maystone was very sad, and consequently his rebellious mood was deepened. He began to feel bitter against the whole world. As a dog caught in a trap will bite any one or anything within reach, so he began to feel pugnaciously disposed towards friends and enemies alike.

Almost the only exceptions he made to his general condemnation were Gladys Presterley and Rafford. The former he hardly expected ever to see again, and the latter was unlikely to cross his horizon very often. But the whole strength of ideal worship was bestowed on the one; the whole weight of robust affection on the other.

The offensive humour of Jones increased on the return of Prowse. As they recognised in Maystone the antipodes of themselves, it was a joy to them to endeavour to turn him into ridicule; and whenever business was slack, Prowse would wile away half an hour in the clerks' office, pointing his clumsy jokes at Maystone amid the fawning applause of Jones and the subservient laughter of the other clerks. The banter was always outwardly good-humoured, but Maystone felt the sting of its implied contempt, and, having no powers of repartee, it goaded him to anger, which he found it difficult to conceal.

'You'll have to keep an eye to that young woman of yours,' Prowse remarked one day; 'if she goes tapping at the window to other men while you are in the house, what is she likely to do when you are out of it?'

'The lady you refer to has nothing to do with me,' Maystone answered for the twentieth time; a statement which was received with the usual incredulous laughter, and a recommendation not to be so shy about his conquests.

'You had better take care,' Prowse continued, 'or I shall

be cutting you out one of these days. I often see her at the station, you know; and though she pretends to be a bit coy, she manages to come in my way pretty often.'

'Look here,' said Maystone sternly, 'do you think it the act of a gentleman to persecute an unfortunate girl——'

'I'm sorry she has been unfortunate,' said Prowse with a grin; 'I hope you weren't the guilty party.' The others shouted with laughter at this sally.

Maystone's blood boiled, but he felt helpless. Against so many scoffers it was useless to contend. If he allowed his anger to get the better of him, it would only make matters worse. He calmed himself with difficulty, and said quietly—

'I suppose because a lady is poor, and consequently unprotected, it seems incredible to you that she should be as respectable as your own female belongings. Perhaps you don't know that she is engaged to be married to a friend of mine.'

'Is he a fighting man?' asked Prowse jocosely.

'Some of his friends may be,' Maystone answered, and turned to his desk. Jones raised a feeble laugh, but something in the tone of this last remark seemed to have sobered Prowse for the moment. He stared at Maystone contemptuously, but refrained from replying, and turned the conversation to other topics. There was a general feeling that the matter had gone rather beyond a joke.

Maystone returned to his lodgings that evening in a mood of savage discontent. It seemed a hard lot which placed him in a subordinate position to a man like Prowse. The social scheme certainly wanted reorganisation.

He found Batton waiting for him. The amiable creature appeared to be also in a state of depression, which Maystone rather resented, as he felt capable of creating quite

enough gloom for his own requirements. Batton remarked in a discontented tone—

‘The Chilveys have been grumbling at me for not taking you down to see them again. Will you come there to-day if you have nothing better to do? I expect you are engaged, aren’t you?’

‘No, I shall be very glad to come.’

‘All right, then. But if any one says anything about it, I hope you’ll explain that you haven’t had time to go there, and it isn’t my fault.’

‘But I should have been delighted to go. I want very much to have another talk with Miss Chilvey, only I didn’t like to go without you.’

‘How very considerate!’ said Batton sarcastically. Maystone stared at him in astonishment.

‘What *do* you mean?’ he asked.

‘Oh, only that I think you might find some other *confidante* instead of coming between engaged people in that way.’

‘My dear fellow, what on earth do you mean? You know perfectly well that I shouldn’t dream of such a thing. Miss Chilvey was only kind enough to take an interest in me because I am your friend.’

‘I should like to know your definition of friendship,’ Batton answered bitterly. ‘But come along, or we shall miss the train.’

Maystone had some idea of refusing to go, but thought it best to ignore his friend’s absurd attitude. It really seemed rather hard that he should have to bear so much on account of Miss Chilvey, who was absolutely nothing to him. He began to wonder if, after all, the injustice and unhappiness in the world were due so very much to social laws.

When they arrived at Mr. Chilvey’s house they discovered

that the young lady under discussion had gone out to spend the evening with some friends. From the satisfied smile on Batton's face when this information was given by Mrs. Chilvey, it was clear that he had known of it beforehand, and had purposely brought Maystone to miss her. Maystone began to feel angry at his ridiculous behaviour, and any compunction he might previously have had as to forming a friendship with Miss Chilvey was entirely dissolved.

Mrs. Chilvey was in proud possession of a new idea. Her opposite neighbours had installed the electric light in their house, and she had been across to inspect it. She discoursed on the subject during the whole of the evening. No one listened to her, but that she did not expect.

'Just think of it,' she said; 'they haven't a candle in the house, and they won't use a box of matches in a month. You just go in and push a little knob up and down, and there you are! It's just like magic. And it's as cool as if there wasn't any light at all. Well, we do live in wonderful times, that's certain.'

She babbled on the subject for more than an hour, while Batton carried on a heated discussion with Mr. Chilvey respecting the limitation of hours of labour. It ended in Mr. Chilvey remarking with cutting emphasis—

'If you can't see my point, I am sorry for you. It is possible to correct misguided intelligence, but such hopeless mental obscurity as yours seems to be incurable. I believe you have really got less mental capacity than my wife, and she is more in the dark than most people.'

'Yes, dear, but then we have only got gas in this house,' said Mrs. Chilvey, who had overheard part of his sentence. Maystone could not help reflecting that there was a good deal of unconscious truth in the remark.

As the evening wore on, Batton seemed restless, and at last he said to Maystone—

'I am going to wait so as to have a few words with Gertrude, but I won't keep you, as you probably want to get back to town. There is a train in about ten minutes, if you care to catch it.'

Mrs. Chilvey protested against the idea of Maystone departing so soon, but he felt that to stay would only cause unnecessary anguish to the worthy Batton, and he decided to take the hint. He wished the party good-night, receiving in exchange a grunt from Mr. Chilvey, and the expression by Mrs. Chilvey of a hope that the train would not be very full.

He passed out into the quiet suburban street. By the flickering light of the scattered gas-lamps it looked dull and unlovely. The ranks of small semi-detached houses, all of the same hideous pattern, the monotonous row of railings and little garden gates, the straight lines of asphalt pavement, all seemed to speak of narrow, unimaginative respectability. In some ways it was far more depressing than a slum.

As he turned away from the house, two figures hurried down the street towards him—a man and a woman. The woman appeared to be endeavouring to escape from the man, who was evidently forcing unwelcome attentions on her. As they drew near, the man flung his arm round the woman's waist; and when she angrily threw it off and requested him to desist, Maystone recognised Miss Chilvey's voice. He rushed forward, and with a violent shove sent the man reeling into the roadway. As he anticipated, it was Prowse.

Prowse had been drinking, and lost his temper. With a burst of filthy language, he squared up to Maystone and hit him a severe blow in the mouth, cutting his lip and loosening his teeth. Maystone had intended to keep calm in the presence of the lady, but the blow blotted all remembrance

out of his brain. The blood surged through his head, he lost consciousness of everything except the flushed, angry face before him, and in a second he was assailing Prowse like a whirlwind.

It was rather a pretty fight for about a minute and a half, but the issue was scarcely doubtful from the first. Prowse was at least two stone heavier, and his reach was far longer. But he knew nothing of boxing, and even when quite sober he was woefully out of condition. Maystone, on the other hand, had a very fair notion of the way to use his fists, and was light and active. Prowse endeavoured to beat down his guard by sheer force, but Maystone got away neatly, and managed to deliver a well-planted left-hand body blow, followed almost immediately by a swinging cross-counter on the jaw. This finished the battle. The next thing that Prowse realised with any distinctness was that he was sitting in the middle of the road, wondering how he had got there, and why the gas-lamps were dancing round him in giddy circles.

He rose with some difficulty, picked up his hat, and glared sulkily at his adversary.

'I'll make you sorry for this, Maystone,' he growled, with another string of oaths. Then he went away slowly, with faltering steps, feeling very ill.

Maystone turned to Miss Chilvey, who was clinging to the railings, her face a ghastly white in the dusk. She reeled, and seemed about to fall. He sprang forward and put his arm round her to support her. Her head sank on to his shoulder, and she burst into a flood of hysterical weeping.

He felt a blow on his other shoulder, and looked round to find Batton regarding him with furious eyes.

'This is your friendship!' Batton exclaimed in tragic tones. 'Go! I have done with you for ever!'

He took the helpless form of Miss Chilvey in the circle of his arm, pushed Maystone aside, and led her towards the house. As he was so much shorter than the girl, and she seemed still to be incapable of holding up her head, she rested it on the top of his hat. It was a grotesque spectacle.

Maystone regarded it without amusement. He felt that the ironic humours of Fate were being pushed beyond due bounds.

## CHAPTER IV

### A PAINFUL PARTING

WHEN Maystone awoke next morning, he realised that his mouth was stiff and swollen, and hastily got out of bed to inspect the injury in his cracked looking-glass. His face was not so much disfigured as he had expected, but the marks were sufficiently evident to make him feel that he would prefer not to go out of doors till after dark, and he sat down on his bed to think over his future plans.

It was obvious that he could not remain any longer in the office of Messrs. Flatten and Prowse. He would probably receive some intimation of the fact from them in the course of the day, but under any circumstances he would not go there again until he heard from them. What was he going to do next?

He proceeded to dress, thinking the matter over. He had not felt in such high spirits for a long time. The exciting prospect of a change of some kind in his life exhilarated him, and the difficulties of the future had not yet shaped themselves with sufficient clearness to frighten him. He had finished his term of slavery, and he resolved not to put his neck under the yoke again.

He rang the bell for his breakfast, and the slatternly girl who attended to the wants of the lodgers came in and began to lay the table. The preparations for the meal were not altogether inviting. A tablecloth full of darns, and stained with the week's usage, spread on a rickety table,



beneath an assortment of ugly and ill-matched crockery, apparently the relics of various sets; a leaking teapot, knives with loosened handles, and salt-cellars with bone spoons; and, for a setting to this festive board, the untidy bedroom, the unmade bed with its tumbled sheets, the faded threadbare carpet, the unemptied bath, the chipped and discoloured crockery, the smoke-stained muslin curtains, and windows dull with dust and grime. But everything seemed less repellent than usual this morning, and he sat down to make an onslaught on flabby strips of ill-cooked bacon, burnt toast, and pallid butter, with the cheerful readiness of youth and hope.

There was a letter for him in his father's handwriting. He broke it open, and learned that Colonel Maystone was passing through London, and would be at the Grosvenor Hotel that evening, where he would wish his son to visit him immediately on returning from the city, as he was engaged to dine out.

This was most opportune. He had resolved on the course which he intended to pursue in the future, and would be glad to get everything settled at once. As his father had been making him a small allowance hitherto, he felt that he might reasonably ask him to continue it, and leave him to exist on it or supplement it as his wishes and opportunities allowed. It was so small, that the expense to Colonel Maystone would hardly be less if Nigel were to live with him at Marchfont. And as the Colonel had never shown any particular interest in his son's career, he would probably raise no question as to the occupation of his time, provided that no further demands for money were made.

That being settled, Maystone proposed to devote himself entirely to political agitation. Though his Socialist friends did not regard him with any exceptional favour, it was probable that they would be glad enough to make use

of services so freely offered to be employed in any capacity. In time he might attain to influence, and gradually strike out a line of his own. Discarding all in the Socialist programme of which he disapproved, he might become the leader of a new and stronger party of reform, which would be reinforced by many moderate men who at present held aloof. The possibilities which his imagination unfolded were limitless.

With these thoughts in his mind, he settled down to spend the morning in delicious reverie. The horizon seemed clear at last. Of course he would be very poor. But he intended to live with the people as well as for them ; and when the last relic of social position had been stripped off, and he was settled in some suitable domicile, he would surely have sufficient money for his simple wants.

His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of the servant.

‘A gentleman to see you, sir,’ she announced with unconscious irony. The gentleman was Jones.

‘Well, Maystone,’ he said, ‘I hear you’ve been going it pretty well. What have you been up to with poor old Prowse?’

‘Prowse behaved like a cad, and I tried to give him a lesson. That’s all.’

‘Oh, he didn’t mean any harm. Of course, as the gurl belongs to you more or less, he oughtn’t to have come poaching on your preserves ; but, still, it’s only natural, you know. After all, that sort of thing is more the woman’s fault as a rule. They *do* give a fellow such a lot of encouragement. Don’t you trust them further than you can see them, my boy.’

Jones looked portentously grave and knowing as he proffered this specimen of wisdom. Maystone restrained a desire to kick him out of the room, and replied coldly—

'Thank you for your advice. Is that all you came to bring me?'

'You needn't be so huffy,' said Jones in an injured tone; 'I've had some experience of these things, I can tell you, and I only spoke as a friend, just to help you to keep out of such scrapes in future. But if you think you know best, that's your own affair. Here's a letter for you from Flatten.'

Maystone took the envelope and drew from it an epistle which, after giving a brief and utterly untrue version of the events of the night before, ended with an intimation that his services would no longer be required by the Firm.

'Is there any answer?' Jones asked, when Maystone had finished reading the letter.

'Yes,' he answered. He tore the letter across and thrust it back into the envelope. 'Take him that,' he said, 'and tell him with my compliments that if Prowse ever attempts to repeat the assault he committed on an unprotected lady last night, he, and not I, will be the person prosecuted. And as for you, if you ever dare to suggest again the filthy insinuations which you have thrown out from time to time against the same lady, I'll treat you as I treated him. Now go!'

And Jones, rather terrified, went.

His method of replying to Mr. Flatten's letter had worked off some of Maystone's indignation, but he still felt very angry. Considering all things, his acquaintance with Miss Chilvey had not brought him good luck. She had been the indirect cause of the annoyance to which he had been subjected by Prowse and Jones, of the loss of his situation, of the unjust aspersions on his character from Mr. Flatten, and, in all probability, of a hopeless quarrel with Batton. As his personal interest in her had been of the very slightest, this was certainly hard. It was evidently his fate to be misunderstood.

He was especially annoyed to think that his friendship with Batton should be terminated in such a ridiculous way. But he had little hope of the cloud between them melting. Batton's limited reasoning powers and sensitive imagination led him to see everything in an exaggerated light. And though Miss Chilvey would no doubt explain to him the true cause of the position in which he had found her, the jealousy which had been kindled in his heart would not die easily. Maystone knew the little man's nature too well to suppose that he would soon lay aside such an agreeable reason for feeling himself misused. Imaginary martyrdom was his profession, though he was quite unconscious of the fact.

However, Maystone thrust all these troubles from his mind, and returned to his dreams and contemplations. If he could only come to a satisfactory understanding with his father, he would soon surmount any other difficulties.

The hours wore on; and when the misty half-light of the autumn day deepened into dusk, and the lamps began to dot the gloom with their orange jets of flame, he went out, and made his way to the Grosvenor Hotel. Colonel Maystone was in, and he was shown up at once to his father's room.

Colonel Maystone shook hands in silence, and regarded him rather sternly for some seconds. Then he burst out in a tone of irritation—

‘What confounded folly have you been up to now?’

‘What do you refer to?’ asked Nigel, checking the corresponding feeling of anger which rose in him at this address.

‘You know what I mean,’ replied the Colonel fiercely. ‘I happened to be in the City to-day, and called at Prowse and Flatten's office to see if you were there, and Mr. Flatten told me a story which has filled me with grief and

shame. I suppose I have no right to expect that my son should steer clear of all the temptations that assail a young man; but I did hope that he was sufficiently a gentleman to avoid vulgar debauchery and rowdyism.'

'Before you condemn me altogether,' Maystone answered, 'may I remind you that you have only heard one side of the story?'

'I know it, and I am anxiously awaiting your explanation. I only hope you can show that the case is not quite so black as it looks, though I don't see how anything can alter the facts much. The marks on your face show that they have not been greatly exaggerated.'

The Colonel sat down and regarded his son with judicial severity. Maystone stood before him with an air of respectful confidence.

'I suppose,' he said, 'that Flatten repeated to you the version of the story he has received from Prowse, which I understand is this—that I was seen by Prowse in company with a woman of the lowest character; that, moved by virtuous solicitude for my welfare, he tried to induce me to leave her, and that my only reply was to commit a violent assault on him. Is that what you heard?'

The Colonel nodded assent.

'That was something like it,' he said; 'it was also added that you were drunk and had already been fighting, and that your face was streaming with blood.'

Maystone's temper blazed out.

'Look here, father,' he exclaimed vehemently, 'you and I haven't always understood each other as well as we might—you don't approve of many of my views, and I know that in many ways you would like me to be different from what I am; but, by God, I'm not a liar, and you know it; and I swear to you that there isn't a word of truth in this mass of spiteful rubbish that they have told you.'

His father regarded him with a troubled look. After a long pause he said in an altered tone—

‘No, Nigel, whatever your faults are, I know you are not a liar. Tell me honestly what happened, and I’ll believe you.’

Maystone’s defiant mood melted before these words like mist before the wind. Tears rushed to his eyes, and he had to cough a lump out of his throat before he was able to proceed. He told his father in simple language the exact history of all that had happened. The Colonel listened with interest, which gradually increased into excitement as Nigel related the incidents of the fight.

‘By Jove!’ said the Colonel, getting up from his chair and pacing the room, ‘by Jove! that was the right way to do it! Get away quickly, and then in under his guard, and get the left just over the heart, and then the right on the jaw before he has time to recover, and the business is settled! You couldn’t have caught him quite on the point of the jaw, or he wouldn’t have been up again for five minutes, but you were near enough for all practical purposes. By Jove! I remember boxing with a fellow out in India once—a great, heavy chap as big as two of me—and I caught him with a swinging right just on the exact spot, and he went down like an ox. And poor Dick Wilscoth had a row with a fellow at Epsom once, and the beggar came at him with his arms going all over the place like a windmill, and Dick slipped aside and——’

The Colonel was dancing about the room in the excitement of these reminiscences, when he suddenly recollected that his judicial duties were not complete. He checked himself abruptly, and sat down in his chair again with a severe countenance, which his sparkling eyes somewhat belied.

‘Your explanation is satisfactory so far,’ he said, ‘but I

should like to hear a little more about the woman. Who is she, and how do you come to be her friend? I know young fellows find it difficult not to make mistakes sometimes, but I have always looked on you as a steady chap, and I should be sorry to think that you had been getting into habits which are certainly against the moral law. We have got to do our duty, you know, and obey orders, even if it does seem rather hard sometimes.'

'But, my dear father,' Maystone answered with some annoyance, 'there's no question of morality involved. Miss Chilvey is a lady of the highest character, who is engaged to be married to a friend of mine—at least he *was* my friend till yesterday.'

'Till yesterday?' said the Colonel in the tone of a man following up an important clue; 'why on earth should yesterday's events have affected your friendship?'

'Oh, the man is an ass in some ways, and absurdly jealous, and he thinks that I was paying attention to the young woman.'

'Dear me!' said the Colonel. He began to be quite pleased with his own sagacity. Evidently there was something more in the story than had yet been explained, and he would show his lawyerlike ability by clearing the matter up. 'Dear me! She must be a queer sort of girl to play off one of you against the other in that way. Is she a lady?'

'Oh, I don't suppose she is exactly what *you* would call a lady as far as her social position goes,' Maystone answered with some irritation. 'But she certainly is a lady in every true sense of the word.'

'Perhaps so,' said the Colonel, 'perhaps so.' He was beginning to be quite pleased with the *rôle* he was playing. He had accepted his son's explanation of the facts, and was quite favourably disposed towards him now. But the

compliment which he paid to his own acuteness by continuing the cross-examination was so pleasant to him, that he would not yet unbend outwardly. 'But even if she is everything that could be wished,' he went on, 'I don't quite see what can have led you to go into such society. You had much better make friends with girls of your own class. I'm not particular about social position, but still one has to accept these conventions as one finds them.'

'I hate conventions,' Maystone broke out; 'Miss Chilvey in my opinion is worth a dozen empty-headed fashionable dunces. She devotes her whole life to studying and teaching the loftiest social ideals.'

'How? Do you mean that she teaches in a night-school, or what?'

'No. She tries to bring her fellow-creatures to a sense of the awful problems that are crying for solution. She works daily in the cause of social reform.'

'Eh? What?' The Colonel stared at him with wide-open eyes. 'You don't mean to say that she is a Socialist?'

'Certainly she is.'

'And you—you admire her views?—you approve of her teaching?'

'In great measure I do.'

Maystone was alarmed at the result of this announcement on his father. The old man sank back in his chair with half-shut eyes, the colour ebbing from his ruddy face.

'Surely I am heavily punished,' he moaned feebly. 'To think that I should live to hear this! And he is my son—my son!' Then he suddenly sat upright and turned on Maystone, his eyes blazing with wrath.

'I am an old man,' he thundered, 'and I've spent my life trying to serve my God and my Queen. I have fought and suffered for my country. I have tried to do my duty and to live a clean and upright life. And you—my son—'



come to me and tell me calmly that you are associating yourself with a lot of rebels and atheists and thieves ; a pack of mischievous, lying, prating ruffians who are doing their best to destroy religion and morality and loyalty and decency, who are corrupting the very life-blood of this poor old country ! Oh, surely I haven't deserved this !'

He sank back in his chair again, the picture of dejection. Maystone lowered his head and fixed his eyes on the floor.

'I am very, very sorry if I have caused you pain,' he said. 'But I implore you to believe that at any rate I am doing what I believe to be right. I may be mistaken. If so, I shall have to pay the penalties of mistake. But, at any rate, I am honestly trying also to do my best for my country and my fellow-men.'

'I think we had better not discuss the matter any more,' said the Colonel in a hard, dry voice. 'To change the subject, let us consider what your future plans are to be. Have you given the matter a thought ?'

'Yes, and I have made up my mind. I venture to ask you to continue the small allowance you have made me hitherto. I promise not to ask you for a halfpenny more at any time. I will find occupation for myself.'

'I must know what occupation you contemplate before I agree,' replied the Colonel.

'I would rather not have told you after what you have said ; but to be honest, I intend also to devote my life to the cause of social reform.'

Colonel Maystone rose to his feet. He looked very soldierlike and dignified as he stood and gazed at his son with a stern face, which showed no sign of emotion or anger. His hands trembled a little, but his figure was firm and erect.

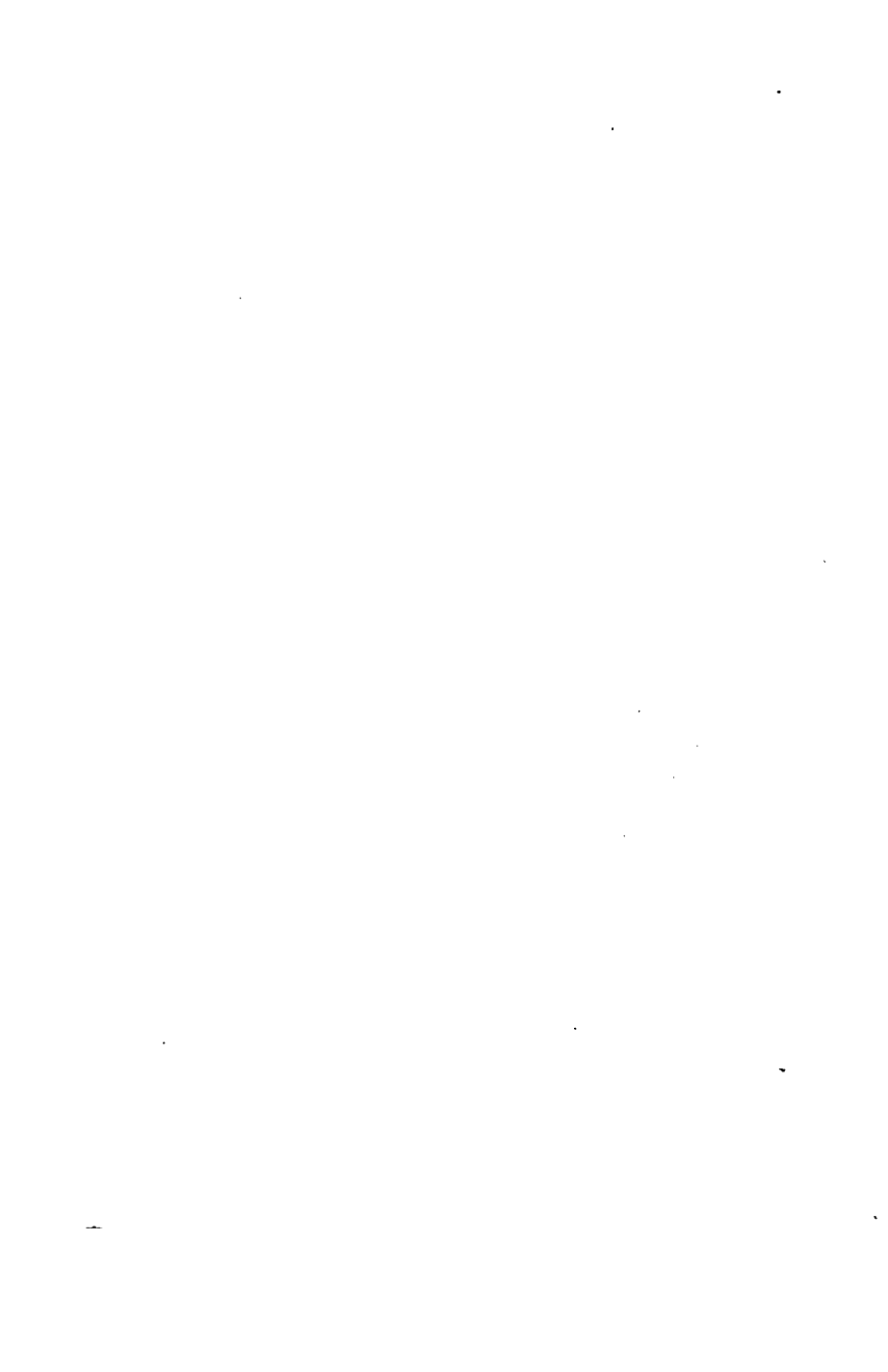
'You are bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh,' he said ; 'you are the child of my union with one who came to

me as an angel from heaven ; but you shall die of starvation in the street before I will give you one halfpenny to help you in the devil's work that you have undertaken. Until you come to me and promise that you will never attempt by word or deed to spread these damnable opinions abroad, I will never advance a farthing. If, as you say, you believe you are doing right, go and do it ; but don't ask me to help you. I would far rather throw my money into the sea. Go, if you are determined to. You must get your living as you can. God grant that you may learn in time the awful errors which you have adopted ! Whenever you like to come back and tell me that you have learned to see things right, you will find me ready to welcome you and to forget the past. Hold what opinions you like ; but do not expect me to treat you as my son till you have left off fighting against your country, your Queen, and your God. Till then I have done with you.'

He turned away with his white head proudly erect and his lips firmly compressed. Nigel gazed at him unflinchingly, but through a blinding haze of tears. Then he bent his head again and moved quietly out of the room. As he closed the door he heard his father sob.



## BOOK IV



## CHAPTER I

### MATRIMONY

MR. and Mrs. Presterley had come up to London for a few weeks at the beginning of July. Gladys had been married nearly a year.

Presterley had bought the lease of a house in Lowndes Square, but as yet they had hardly used it at all, having spent nearly the whole of their time in the country. He hated London, and had developed a special dislike for this particular house almost as soon as he had bought it. This dislike was a somewhat manufactured article, as the house was a pleasant one, and he feared that Gladys might wish to take him there often. He did not mean to spend much of their married life in the detested town. She, on the other hand, had every intention of spending a good deal of time there. Though the matter had hitherto been laid aside, it existed as a very likely ground for future quarrels.

The house was well suited for entertainments of any kind, and Gladys had hoped to give some pleasant dinner-parties, but her husband obstinately refused to permit such a thing.

'I don't want a lot of beastly people coming here to turn up their noses at everything,' he said. 'We'll have one or two friends now and then, but I'm not going in for regular society. That isn't my line.'

Gladys wondered what his line was, but she said nothing. She had already learned that it was useless to fight against

his obstinacy. He seldom lost his temper, seldom spoke a harsh word to her. He was nearly always amiable and almost kind in his uncouth way. But whatever he wished had to be done. Her protests were simply ignored.

She soon found that the 'one or two friends' were intended to be his friends and not hers. Of course, he imagined that his friends would be hers. But though she did her best to be cordial towards the dull, underbred men he brought to the house, she found it difficult. Fortunately for her, he dined at his club with them a good deal.

Nothing would induce him to go into society; but as long as he was allowed to take his own way, he had no objection to her going out as much as she liked. She accepted every invitation, and rushed wildly into a vortex of balls and parties. A young and pretty married woman need have no fear of neglect in London. Unkind people already began to talk about her appearance everywhere alone. But their malice was even worse aimed than usual, for she never neglected her husband's wishes, and always dined at home with him whenever he was there.

He was most generous towards her so far as money was concerned. He was always making her beautiful presents of jewellery and taking her to dine at expensive restaurants. He would have been astounded by the suggestion that she had any cause for being otherwise than perfectly happy. He was quite satisfied with her, and very much in love with her. Marriage seemed to him an admirable institution.

When they dined alone together, he invariably drank himself into a state of drowsiness, which he slept off in the drawing-room afterwards. Gladys used to leave him asleep in his chair when she went out for the evening's amusements. As he hardly ever talked when he was awake, his slumber did not make much difference.

With some difficulty she persuaded him to allow her to

ask Sir Thomas and Lady Woolton to dinner one night. This couple had been married about two months longer than themselves, and a juvenile Woolton had appeared upon the scenes early in the summer. The former Miss Tintern regarded her offspring with a jovial adoration that was quite pleasant to see.

As Lady Woolton swept rustling into Gladys' drawing-room, followed by her cheerful-looking husband, she seemed to fill it with an atmosphere which it had never known before. To the outside world Gladys appeared the same bright, vital person of maiden times; but at home, when the mask was off, and the exhilarating contagion of society shut out, she showed in a strangely altered light. Her taciturn husband perceived no difference. He was vaguely conscious of the fact that when they were first married she had bothered him with attempts to make him talk; but as he had shown his disinclination for such a pastime, he thought it only natural that she should now be as silent as himself. She always responded cheerfully on the occasions when he felt moved to address remarks to her; she was always pretty and well dressed; to him she seemed the same as ever. Only herself knew how her habits and her nature were changing.

'My dear Gladys,' exclaimed Lady Woolton, 'how delightful to see you again! I know we're dreadfully late, but please don't reproach me, for Tommy has been scolding me for my unpunctual habits the whole way here. They're such tyrants, these men!'

She turned laughing to Presterley, and held out her hand cordially, determined to show nothing of her previous dislike for him. He took it clumsily and said, 'Better late than never, Lady Woolton,' in a tone that was meant to be jocular, but sounded like a sneer.

On the tablets of her memory she wrote the word 'Beast.'



When they were at dinner she scrutinised Gladys closely to find traces of unhappiness. But her hostess showed a face of gay good-humour that completely baffled her. The conversation lay entirely between the ladies and Sir Thomas. Presterley took no part in it, and after a time they ignored his presence.

'Oh, Gladys,' Lady Woolton suddenly exclaimed, 'I met Mr. Rafford yesterday, and he asked a lot about you. I gave him your address, and he said he should come and see you.'

Presterley stared at his wife with a sudden look of interest which startled her. She felt her colour rise slightly. Could this dull man have noticed anything in days gone by? She forgot that love and jealousy may sharpen the bluntest intellect.

'I shall be so glad to see him again,' she said; 'I haven't seen him since we were married.'

'Not since Lady Bloomshire's ball,' said Presterley in a tone that revealed to her how much more he had observed than she had believed. A shade of annoyance crossed her face, but to Lady Woolton's inquiring gaze she replied, 'Oh, we became engaged at Lady Bloomshire's ball, you know,' a statement which did not altogether make the puzzle plain to her friend.

When the ladies rose to leave the room, Woolton darted a quaint look of hopeless resignation at his wife. He did not relish the idea of a *tête-à-tête* with Presterley. She responded with a glance of humorous enjoyment of his woe.

Upstairs she flung herself into an armchair with an air of contentment.

'Oh, Gladys,' she said, 'it *is* nice to be married, isn't it?'

'It's always satisfactory to feel that one is earning one's

living,' Gladys answered with a smile. She had reposed herself negligently on a sofa, in half-recumbent fashion. Her face was bright and animated, but there was a faint suggestion of weariness about her attitude. Lady Woolton looked at her keenly.

'You haven't given London much of the light of your countenance this year,' she said, trying to turn her mind away from the unpleasant thoughts raised by her friend's remark.

'No,' said Gladys, 'Herbert prefers the country and a quiet life. We are very domestic people.'

'Do you like the quiet life too?'

'Oh yes,' she said, with apparent sincerity; 'you don't know how much I enjoy the long, uneventful days at Rickwood. It is such a pretty place. I hope you will come and see us there in the autumn, and I will show you all my favourite haunts.'

'I suppose you have swarms of people coming and going,' remarked Lady Woolton. 'We always have such a lot that I get almost tired of them sometimes. But Tommy and I both like a lot of folks buzzing about. We weren't made for solitude.'

'We are quite different. We hardly ever have any one. But I never find it dull, because there are such lots of things to do. I read such a quantity of books, I am becoming quite learned. And then, when Herbert is out, I work at my music. I really think I am beginning to play quite decently. You see, in the hunting season he is out nearly every day, and so I can play without disturbing him.'

'But I thought you hunted too. I heard legends of your riding like a demon.'

Gladys laughed carelessly. Lady Woolton was still completely puzzled by her. She could hardly believe it

possible that Gladys would be happy in such a life and with such a husband. But certainly she seemed content.

'I did hunt at first,' Gladys said, 'but I had a bad fall, and it has utterly destroyed my nerve. I wouldn't get on to a rocking-horse now if you paid me. Indeed, my nerves have become absurdly shaky altogether this year.'

She laughed again, rather unsteadily. Lady Woolton began to think that she saw things more clearly. If a self-willed person like Gladys only played the piano when her husband was out, for fear of disturbing him—which seemed rather absurd in a house the size of Rickwood—she must be living a life of self-repression, which would account for shattered nerves more than many falls. Gladys would certainly have allowed no man to bully her, so that it was clear that this life, so foreign to her nature, was voluntarily endured.

'I suppose she is determined to make her marriage a success,' thought Lady Woolton. 'She is very plucky, but——' She gazed at Gladys with sad foreboding in her mind.

Though they were old friends, conversation did not seem to run very easily. Gladys' apparent anxiety to conceal nothing conclusively proved that she was concealing a good deal. But the part was well acted.

They discussed Lady Woolton's baby, and, absorbed by the subject, the happy mother scarcely noticed the wistful eagerness with which Gladys pursued the topic. After much gossip and many anecdotes of the infant's marvellous precocity, Gladys remarked lightly—

'I suppose it is nice to have a baby to play with, but it must be rather a nuisance in some ways. It is a dreadful responsibility to bring a living creature into such a world as this.'

Lady Woolton was almost indignant.

'It isn't such a bad old world,' she said; 'and as to the baby being a nuisance—wait and see.'

Gladys' lip quivered, and the tears rushed to her eyes. It was the first glimpse behind the mask which she had made possible. But she recovered her self-possession, and said smilingly—

'I daresay I am only an instance of Æsop's fox over again.'

Lady Woolton moved across the room and sat lovingly beside her on the sofa; after which the conversation was too strictly feminine to be reported.

Presently Sir Thomas and Presterley re-appeared. Presterley looked sleepy and stupid. He sat down almost immediately in a convenient chair, without speaking. Gladys glanced at him, and then turned to her friends with an unclouded face. She talked with such vivacity and spirit, that they forgot the presence of her husband altogether.

When at last it occurred to them that it was time to go, they turned towards him, and discovered that he was fast asleep. Gladys, with some jesting remark, went across the room to rouse him, but she had to shake him before she could make him realise where he was.

He got up slowly and apologised in a thick voice. Gladys had rung the bell and ordered her guests' carriage, for he showed no intention of doing anything for them.

'I have made Lady Woolton promise to pay us a visit in the autumn,' she said, with the perpetual smile, which was apparently becoming mechanical.

'Lady Woolton will find it devilish dull if she does,' he said with a yawn. 'If she takes my advice, she'll keep away.'

Then he shook hands with his guests and moved rather unsteadily towards the sofa, where he sat down, and at

once fell asleep again. Gladys went out on to the landing with them, and apologised for him, on the plea that he was tired. They expressed for him the commiseration which they really felt for her, and departed downstairs. As soon as they were gone, she rushed up to her room.

After they were seated in their carriage, neither Sir Thomas nor Lady Woolton spoke for several seconds. At length Woolton took his glass out of his eye, rubbed it violently with his handkerchief, and put it back in its place again abruptly.

'Well—damn it all!' he remarked.

'Do you think he was drunk?' asked Lady Woolton.

'Drunk as an owl,' replied Sir Thomas, with a fine disregard for the facts of natural history.

'Do you suppose it happens often?'

'Well, he would hardly have chosen a night when he had guests to make his first attempt at the game, I should think.'

'Poor Gladys! It's awful to think of.'

'She ought to have known what to expect,' he answered; 'why on earth did she marry him?'

'Oh, Tommy, why do people do half the silly things they do, and spend their lives repenting of them? It is such a step in the dark for most women at the best of times. Goodness knows what might have happened to me if I hadn't met you. When I think how happy I am, I feel as if it were almost brutal to enjoy life so much while poor Gladys has to endure what we have just seen. I wish we could do something to help her. It is too miserable.'

Lady Woolton quite broke down, and rested her head on her husband's shoulder with the tears streaming down her face. Woolton put his arm round her, and they sat in silence. They were only two frivolous, good-humoured, feather-brained people. But perhaps some of the greater

and graver mysteries of life were dimly visible to them for a little time; some of the things which are occasionally hidden from the wise and prudent.

When they reached home, Woolton said, 'Do you think we might just go and have a look at the youngster?'

'Oh, Tommy dear, it's so late, and we shall wake him up.'

'Not if we're very quiet,' pleaded Sir Tommy, and they crept together into the nursery.

Tommy the second lay asleep in his cradle, his round face half buried under the clothes. One small hand was beside it on the pillow, like a pink shell.

Woolton regarded his firstborn solemnly through his eyeglass. Then he turned to his wife with a beaming countenance.

'Oh, Polly,' he whispered, 'ain't he a little ripper?'

Lady Woolton had got hold of her husband's hand, and her only reply was a tight squeeze of his fingers as she led him softly from the room.

## CHAPTER II

### FRIENDSHIP

CHARLIE RAFFORD called on Mrs. Presterley next day. The meeting was not without embarrassment for both of them; and after they had shaken hands with well-acted politeness, they sat down and felt a trifle foolish. As this feeling did not supply them with conversation, Rafford made an effort to shake it off.

‘What a nice house you have got!’ he remarked. ‘I always like Lowndes Square. It is so full of trees.’

Gladys was seized with an absurd thought that the same remark would apply to a bootmaker’s shop, and began to laugh, feeling sillier than ever.

‘They make the house rather dark,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he replied gravely, ‘but the shade is pleasant in hot weather.’

‘I wonder whether one would turn black, like a fish, if one always lived in the shade,’ she said.

‘Perhaps,’ he said; ‘I believe it is a scientific fact that animals always adapt themselves to their environment.’

‘I hope it isn’t universally true,’ she replied, with a faint shudder. Her words were spoken in the same jesting tone; but somehow they conveyed such a sense of bitter discontent, that Rafford’s powers of keeping up the shuttlecock of small talk broke down. He could only gaze at her silently. She looked away, and another pause followed.

In the year which had passed since their last meeting, Rafford had interrogated himself frequently, and had decided that he was not and never had been in love with her. She had touched his fancy a good deal, but no deeper feeling had been roused. Indeed, he was now firmly convinced that no real possibility of deeper feeling existed in him. There might have been such a possibility once, in far-off, unclouded, boyish days. But now, when his nature had been hardened, and his feelings frittered away in a long experience of the world's frivolities, in a succession of light amours and flirtations, he believed that his heart's capital had all been spent. It was better to accept the worldly view and to regard love as a pretty illusion, a thing to play with as a relief from the dull realities of life. At the same time, he had made a virtuous resolution not to play any such game with Gladys Presterley. She probably had illusions on the subject still; but even if they were illusions, he, at least, would do nothing to dispel them. If cynicism seemed the only possible state of mind for himself, it should not be his fault if she became cynical also.

But now that he was there in her presence again, the attraction of her personality began to make itself felt. She was so pretty, so graceful, so much alive. And the belief that she was also unhappy added to her charm. He had not intended that she should disturb his thoughts for a moment; but already he realised that they were beginning to riot again.

Life was very short, and, after all, what would it matter in a short time whether they kept up a barrier between them or not? Let them talk as they felt.

The resolutions were beginning to take their place in the traditional pavement.

'I can't talk rubbish any more,' he said in an altered voice. 'But it seems to me that all our conversations are



carried on in silences. When we speak we leave off saying what we mean.'

She looked at him uneasily. The same thought had been passing through her mind, and, as usual, he had read and interpreted it. Her feet seemed to be touching the edge of a downward slope.

'In that case,' she said, in low tones, 'I think we had better talk as much as we can.'

He looked at her gravely.

'Are you very unhappy?' he asked.

She sat upright, with a deep flush on her face.

'How dare you ask such a question?' she exclaimed in a trembling voice. 'You have no right to know—now.'

He felt the rebuke all the more keenly for divining what an effort it had cost her to utter it. He knew that she was fighting against the inclination to talk to him from her heart, and he felt a slight sensation of shame when he reflected that in spite of all his resolutions he was making the battle harder for her.

Once again for a brief moment she had broken free from his mastery. She pushed the advantage.

'How is your friend Mrs. Glenmure?' she asked.

'I believe she is quite well,' he said quietly, 'but I have not seen her for nearly a year. I suppose you know that her husband has gone off with another woman?'

'I daresay she will find consolation,' said Gladys bitterly.

'Perhaps. I know little about her now, for our friendship died a natural death, and neither of us has any wish to revive it. I believe she has had a good deal of trouble, but no doubt you will say that it serves her right. Women like to hit another woman when she is down.'

'Oh no,' she exclaimed vehemently, 'you are mistaken. I did not mean what I said. I have so often wanted to tell you how much I regret the uncharitable way I spoke of her

that night when—when we discussed her. I have learned some of the lessons of life since then. I know what may drive a woman to almost any sort of reckless folly, and I can see now how we all want pity rather than condemnation. Life is such a tangled wilderness; how can any of us hope to get through it without being dishevelled and torn?’

The thrill of passion in her voice showed that the force of her self-control was weakened. He was startled by such an impulsive throb of sympathy in his own breast, that he could not trust himself to reply. His silence gave her time to recover, for which she was grateful to him. She had given him a glimpse of the nakedness of her heart, and he had allowed her to cover it up again.

‘What has become of Mr. Maystone?’ she asked, with regained self-possession. ‘I have heard nothing of him for such a long time. Is he in London?’

‘Poor Maystone!’ he answered with a laugh. ‘I don’t know what has become of him. Don Quixote has mounted Rosinante and ridden away, and goodness knows where he has gone to.’

‘What do you mean? I hope nothing happened to him. I like him so much.’

‘I like him very much too, but I can’t help feeling that he is rather ridiculous. He has quarrelled with his father and gone off to live amongst “the people,” as he calls them; but what he is living on, or where he is living, I don’t know.’

‘I don’t see anything ridiculous in it at all,’ she said hotly; ‘why should you laugh at him if he gives up his life to things that he believes in? He may be mistaken, but at any rate you need not have deserted him.’

‘I have not deserted him,’ he answered in his usual indifferent tone; ‘I have tried my best to find where he has gone to, but I haven’t succeeded. As he has asked me

not to try to find him out, I can scarcely send detectives to look for him.'

She had a quick impulse of remorse.

'Forgive me,' she said; 'I ought to know by this time how little your laughter means. He has told me often how good you have been to him. He can scarcely speak of it, he feels it so warmly.'

'Oh, that's all nonsense,' Rafford answered, with the first symptoms of shyness she had ever seen in him. 'I have done nothing for him. You mustn't run away with the idea that I am the soft-hearted cynic of romance, or any rot of that sort. I like Maystone, and we have been good friends, but I *do* think he is an ass in this case.'

'You need not pretend to be ashamed of your good deeds,' she said; 'it is just as foolish as any other kind of pretence.'

'I am ashamed of nothing,' he answered; 'but I have never done anything for Maystone that isn't compatible with mere selfish good-nature.'

It quite annoyed him to think that she would persist in giving him credit to which he was not entitled. But the smile with which she received his disclaimer showed how futile it was for him to protest. He began to feel that it was useless to fight against destiny. Do what he would, she persisted in thinking well of him.

'A woman always thinks either better or worse of a man than he deserves,' he remarked.

'Be careful of aphorisms,' she replied, with the same smile; 'they are the parents of platitudes. But tell me about Mr. Maystone.'

'There isn't much to tell. I got an extraordinary letter from him last winter, saying that he had quarrelled with his employers, and was going to devote his life to—well, I couldn't quite make out what he was going to do, but he

hinted at all kinds of dark and revolutionary changes which he was going to bring about in the world. So far, the world seems to be going on much as usual, but perhaps the subterranean thunder will begin to rumble soon. However, he really has disappeared, for he left no address at his lodgings. He added, in his letter, that his father disapproved of his plans, and refused to give him any money, and that consequently he had resolved to merge himself in the suffering classes and live as they did. I suppose he is going about with a costermonger's barrow, or something of the sort, and selling tomatoes wrapped up in revolutionary leaflets.'

'I hate you when you talk like that,' exclaimed Gladys, with flashing eyes. 'You know as well as I do that he has done a splendid thing. He may be doing no good. He may endure poverty and privation in an utterly useless way. But, at any rate, he is doing what we could never do—he is sacrificing all that makes life pleasant for the sake of an idea. He has put himself miles above you or me, and you know it, and yet you pretend to laugh at him.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I do know it. That is why I laugh. There doesn't seem to be any other course left open to me. You see, I am unfortunately without the ideals which require such sacrifices. If I went to live in a slum and preach Socialism, I should only regard myself as a foolish and mischievous person. I can be *that* more comfortably elsewhere.'

'I expect you will have to choose between selfishness and self-sacrifice some day,' she said; 'I believe it comes to that with most people.'

'I will back selfishness to win,' he answered lightly. But he felt that her words were prophetic. Little did she know that the struggle was likely to concern herself.

They talked of more general topics. Rafford purposely

led her on to discuss the subjects on which her opinions seemed to him most absurd. He felt her fascination mastering him so completely that he struggled to see her in a less attractive light. The impulsive generosity with which she had attacked his cynicism, the enthusiasm for ideals which still called to him faintly from the distant hills of youth, the flush on her cheek, the glow in her eyes, the melody of her voice,—all combined to intoxicate him. Wild thoughts surged through his brain.

The spell did not wear off. He listened to her ill-directed enthusiasm over forms of literature and art which seemed to him unworthy of notice, and yet he found it impossible to think her a fool. She went to the piano and played him the air of some tinkling ballad which had taken her fancy; it suddenly seemed to him to be charged with pathos and passion. Altogether, he felt that he was losing his head; and, with a final effort at self-control, he rose to wish her good-bye.

Their hands met in a lingering grasp of which both were half ashamed, and yet neither of them could bring themselves to forgo it. But they relaxed it abruptly as the door opened and Herbert Presterley came into the room.

He greeted Rafford with his usual surly manner. Rafford responded with cold politeness, and passed out through the open door. Presterley shut the door behind him by way of speeding the parting guest.

‘I’m glad I missed that fellow’s visit,’ he said.

‘Don’t you like him?’ asked Gladys, with a faint suggestion of contempt in her voice.

‘No. Conceited ass! I wish you would give orders that you are not at home to him.’

‘I certainly shall do nothing of the kind. He is an old friend.’

‘Married women are better without friends of that type.’

Gladys checked the burning retort that rose to her tongue, and turned away. After all, he was right from his point of view. He owned her, and expected to be allowed to shape her according to his wishes. She wondered, with a faint sense of bitter amusement, if he was jealous of Rafford.

She did not feel any doubt on the subject that evening, for when she went out to a ball her husband insisted on accompanying her. She hoped that he would remain jealous. It kept him sober at night.

## CHAPTER III

### HIGH PRESSURE

THE Presterleys only remained in London a few days longer, and Gladys did not see Rafford again. He sent her a book which he had promised to lend her, and, in thanking him, she made some comments on its contents. This drew a reply from him, and a correspondence was thus begun which was intermittently kept up for several months.

In another week she was settled once more at Rickwood, and her brief appearance in her former world had become a memory.

Rickwood was a comfortable, homelike house of medium size, with no architectural pretensions, but without glaring defects. It was furnished in the solid, British fashion of a bygone generation, and, with the aid of her own personal trifles, Gladys had succeeded in making the rooms which she used very enduring, and even attractive. There was nothing in bad taste in the house, even if there was nothing of much artistic value. But everything was good of its kind, and the kind was quite unobjectionable.

Outside, the grounds were typical of many similar English homes. There was a good garden and a pretty park, and a picturesque pool in a hollow, lined with thick shrubs and spreading forest-trees, intersected here and

there by a winding gravel path. The country round was undulating and well wooded, and the views presented a pleasant variety of tone and tint and outline, without any approach to the expansive or the grand. You might walk round the property without coming on any violent change in the scenery, and without seeing anything more striking than a village clustered on the side of a hill, a farmhouse nestling in a shallow valley, or a church-spire gracefully breaking the line of some spreading wood. The cows wandered grazing through the park in front of the windows, the rabbits played amongst the rhododendron bushes in the shrubberies, and in the evening the spinneys echoed with the crowing of the pheasants as they went to roost, and the call of wood-pigeons amongst the trees that filled up the landscape. The place looked as if it were lived in and cared for, and abounded in the quiet poetry of English country life.

Here Gladys laboured to fetter her burning soul. She liked the place, and tried her hardest to feel contented there. She endeavoured to bring her mind into harmony with the spirit of its solitude, to find companionship in the whisper of the woods, the glow of autumnal sunsets, the gentle mournfulness of soft, drooping mists, the countless voices of natural life. She took an interest in the garden, and strove to make friends of flowers. She sought and found the bonds of human sympathy in the farm-houses of the tenants and the cottages of the labourers. She watched the humorous, pathetic, sordid, beautiful human drama developing in these quiet places with the same suggestive force as in the world to which she belonged, albeit with less glitter and outcry. She felt that life was pulsing and quivering here as strongly as anywhere else. But she could not escape from the bitter, hopeless feeling that she was on the other side of the footlights,



that the play had no part for her, and that henceforward she must watch its varied, enticing action as a spectator and nothing more.

Do what she would, the voices in her heart grew louder and more clamorous. She had no hope, but she could not attain to the calm of despair or the apathy of indifference. Every day something reminded her of the happiness that flickers through the darkness of the world. Life for other people was chequered black and white. For her it was a dull, monotonous neutral tint. Often as she looked around at the quiet, slumbering woods, at the grass, where drops of moisture sparkled diamond-like in the sunshine, at the peaceful house and the gently-reposeful lawns and shrubberies and paths, the thought came savagely into her mind, what a paradise this place might be with a man she loved!

It seemed so dreadful to grow old without doing more than taste your youth. If all the storms and passions had been finished, if she were a tired wayfarer who only asked for quiet and leisure in which to dream of dead things, her existence would have been suitable enough. But she was young and unexhausted. The blood beat strongly in her veins. Imagination flashed into the future instead of faintly gleaming into the past. She wanted to live, to taste, to feel, to experience. Her life was withering in the bud.

In the first days of her marriage she had submitted to this imprisonment of her spirit without protest, because she believed that it would only be temporary, and that in time she would be able to arrive at a compromise with her husband which would enable her to gratify some of her own tastes without seriously interfering with his. But she was now beginning to realise the nature of the man with whom she had to deal. All thought of compromise

was impossible to him. He was incapable of looking at any question except from his own standpoint. He preferred to shun society, and he simply could not believe that she should hold a different view. He regarded her suggestions as mere idle talk, unworthy of grave notice. He had no desire to thwart her wishes, but it never was clear to his mind that she had any wishes, or that there was any reason for her to have any. He did not weigh the matter at all. It seemed evident to him at a glance that his wife had everything that any woman could desire ; and he would have been honestly surprised if he had been capable of appreciating her discontent.

He was generally good-natured and unaggressive. Even when he was drunk he only went to sleep. He occasionally indulged in irritating sarcasms on her feminine tastes for books and music ; but he made it clear that he really did not consider it to be her fault that she was a woman. It was the hardest of her trials to feel, through all this nightmare of a life, that he was as much in love with her as he had been at first.

The idea of active rebellion was never entertained by her. Her pride would not allow her to confess to herself that her marriage had been a failure. She had entered upon it coolly and defiantly, knowing that it was contrary to the wishes of all who cared for her most. She was resolved not to let them see any justification of their hostility.

But, all the same, as the dull autumn months advanced, and the days grew shorter, and the moist, sunless weather stole the colour from the landscape and the light from the sky, the sense of loneliness and mental isolation became almost too great to bear. She sought relief in her correspondence with Rafford.

Almost unconsciously she was twining him into her life. It would be unfair to say that the thought of love

ever now mixed itself with her remembrance of him. She honestly believed that such a dream had melted away. She had involuntarily given him the first blossom of her heart. If it existed, no doubt he had it still, though she never looked to see. But she told herself that it was withered and dead, and that now he was only her friend.

The definitions and interpretations of the word 'friend' in a dictionary are curiously incomplete.

In her case the word covered a good deal. She wrote to him with the glowing sense of speaking to the one mind which could hear and understand. She received his letters with a thrill of expectant exultation. His opinions guided her in her choice of books. His chance expressions influenced her views of life. In each trivial everyday incident the thought constantly occurred to her that if he had been there he would have looked at it from the same point of view as herself. When she was amused, she could imagine his smile; when she was depressed, she wondered what medicine his strong common-sense would suggest for her depression. In his constant absence she forgot the characteristics which sometimes angered her. His letters were free from the half-patronising mockery with which he had occasionally tried her in actual contact. And gradually she grew into the belief that the letters represented the real man, and that the occasional pretence of brutality and scorn was only a cloak under which he hid the natural softness of his nature. Every now and then some light remark roused in her the fierce old suspicion that he regarded her as a child; and then she was assailed by a wild, reckless feeling that some day she might compel him to take her seriously.

It was a transient feeling, from which she recoiled with something like dismay. But its existence was sufficiently ominous.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FRUITS OF DOMESTICITY

FOR many weeks Gladys lived this solitary life, broken by the advent of few visitors. Dull country neighbours came to shoot ; and, when the hunting season began, Presterley occasionally brought some crony to dine and sleep ; but of female society Gladys saw scarcely anything. As she was the best-looking woman in the neighbourhood, and as her husband's peculiarities compelled her to hold herself aloof from its social side to a great extent, dark hints began to be whispered concerning her reputation. It was suggested in some quarters that Mrs. Presterley drank as well as her husband, while others asserted that her conduct in London had been such that he could not now trust her out of his sight. The more charitable supposed that she was too much influenced by vulgar pride to allow herself to mix freely with her neighbours. One or two people guessed at the truth and pitied her. But their explanation was not sufficiently interesting to be generally received.

Presterley was so unpopular with the county families around, that even those whose knowledge of the world in which his wife had moved saved them from sharing in the vulgar ideas concerning her reputation, were shy of opening an intercourse which would submit them to the unpleasantness of contact with him. And as her pride had at first led her to associate herself with his chilly reception of people

who had hitherto ignored him, she found that she was cut adrift from many pleasant people with whom she would have been glad to make friends. But she was determined to justify her action in marrying him ; and if he was not good enough for them, they were not good enough for her.

She knew that these sacrifices were made to her own pride rather than to her husband's wishes. But she could not help feeling a little hurt that he should take them, as he did, as a matter of course. She had not expected him to understand her. But she had hardly contemplated his satisfied acquiescence in her present position.

Gradually the strain began to tell upon her nerves. She had sharp moments of resentment against the man who was so indifferent to her happiness, or at any rate so blind.

Sometimes she felt as if the loneliness were insupportable. She would have been glad if Lady Maria could have come to stay with her. But the old lady was troubled with rheumatism, and dared not face the damp country at this time of year. She was growing feeble, and felt that a combination of fogs and Presterley would kill her, though she would have faced both if she had realised what was passing in Gladys' mind. But Gladys wrote to her in a cheerful strain that deceived her completely.

One day Gladys broached the subject of a visit from the Wooltons.

'They won't care to come here,' Presterley answered ; 'what's the good of asking people to be bored?'

'But they promised to come, and we promised to ask them. We'd better have them when we shoot the coverts in December, and get a few people to meet them.'

'Oh, we can't be bothered with an infernal party. They'll have to come alone.'

'But really one can't ask them quite alone. What on

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earth will poor Sir Thomas do with himself? You must have some one to meet him. Polly is all right, but we don't know him well enough to treat him like that.'

'Well, I'm not going to have any one else,' he said decidedly.

'Why not?' asked Gladys, with rising anger. 'Why should we live this hermit life? It may suit you. It is killing me.'

'Bosh,' he replied contemptuously. And then, as if repenting, he went on, 'You see, I would be glad to do it, if you really want it, though I think it is absurd. But we must economise a bit just now, and a party costs a lot of money.'

'That's only an absurd excuse,' she answered hotly. 'How can you talk about economising when you keep twelve horses in the stable. Why should we economise?'

'Because we are damned hard up,' he said; 'ten of the horses are going to Tattersall's next month.'

Gladys stared at him in amazement. The statement was absolutely unexpected.

'How has this happened?' she asked; 'you had plenty of money a short time ago.'

'I've had bad luck lately,' he answered indifferently, 'you would make me go to that confounded London, and I dropped a lot of money at cards when we were there. And then I lost a pile on that infernal St. Leger.'

Gladys restrained the hot words that rose to her tongue.

'Well, it can't be helped,' she said; 'I only ask that you won't gamble any more.'

'It's rather too late to ask that; if I don't manage to get a bit back before long, we shall be in a pretty tight place. As it is, we shall probably have to let Rickwood.'

'You might have given me a hint of all this,' she said coldly.

‘What would be the good? But don’t talk about it any more. When I know how things are going to turn out, I’ll tell you. I’m sick of your grumbling. You have everything you could want, and you’re always growling.’

He walked out of the room and left her with her hands clenched and tears of rage and misery in her eyes. Hitherto he had been decently civil to her. Even now it was the uneasiness he was trying to conceal which made him thus unusually irritable. But the injustice of the reproach stung her. Henceforward she put less restraint on the bitter feelings that rose in her heart against him.

There began to be a perceptible change in her attitude towards him. She grew argumentative and defiant, and approached every subject in a polemical mood. The discussion of small details of everyday life generally ended in fiery protest on her part and sullen obstinacy on his. But he always carried his point.

Her conduct surprised and annoyed him. He could not understand why she should be dissatisfied—being quite incapable of appreciating the value of any want which he did not feel himself. He would much rather have lived in perfect harmony with her. Morose and unsociable as he was, her companionship was an infinite source of pleasure to him. Behind the dull wall of stupidity which shut him off from the rest of the world, he was far from happy. And though he scarcely realised his own joylessness, nevertheless he was conscious of an unusual sense of brightness in the society of his wife. Now, when she seemed disposed to thwart his wishes, he felt justly aggrieved, and still more puzzled. He believed that he was on the track of a solution to the mystery when he noticed among her letters one day an envelope addressed to Rafford.

‘Do you keep up a correspondence with that chap?’ he asked.

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'We write to each other sometimes,' she said ; 'do you object?'

He made no reply, and his silence irritated her more than a contentious answer would have done. She could not feel any doubt of his affection for her, however selfish and unsympathetic it might be. He gave her his best, bad as it was. And, knowing that such love as he was capable of laid him specially open to the tortures of jealousy, she could not smother a pang of self-reproach. Considering his absolute callousness with regard to her unhappiness, she resented such a feeling. It seemed as if her own conscience were turning traitor to her.

A few days later Lady Seathwaite invited them to stay at Sandleford. Before accepting, she casually mentioned the matter to her husband. To her astonishment he ordered her to decline the invitation.

'This is really going too far,' she exclaimed. 'Laura is the nearest relation I have in the world, and she has always shown a friendly spirit towards me. I'm sure she has been civil enough to you, too, in all conscience. What possible excuse can I give?'

'Say that I can't leave home just now,' he replied in his slow, indifferent voice ; 'if she is annoyed, she can lay all the blame on me.'

Gladys lost her self-command.

'You'll drive me mad,' she said in tones of concentrated passion. 'It is time I made a stand, and I will make it now. I will not have my life crushed by this hopeless, dreary, monotonous existence. Henceforward I mean to live as other people do, and mix with the world, whether you like it or not. I can't have my friends here if you object, because you would probably insult them if I did. But I will go and stay with them as often as I choose, and if you don't want to come you can remain at home. I have



done what you wished so far, because I didn't want to publish to the world the fact that we don't agree. But I don't care now. The world may know anything it likes, and I shall accept invitations for myself and let you get out of them the best way you can. I don't fear the result. People will soon begin to talk when they find us leading separate lives. But I am not afraid of their judgment. My life is open to the light of day, and their condemnation won't come upon *me*. I have screened you so far, but I will do it no longer.'

Presterley was amazed and cowed by this speech. For the first time he had a faint gleam of intelligence respecting his wife's feelings. It appeared that her dissatisfaction was deep-rooted, not the mere superficial thing which he had imagined it. He wondered vaguely why women were so unreasonable.

'You need not make such a fuss about the matter,' he grumbled, in a tone which was meant to be conciliatory; 'if you want to go gadding about, I won't stand in your way. I'll come with you, though you know I hate it. But this particular visit must be declined.'

'What on earth——' she began, and then stopped short, pondering. An idea occurred to her.

'I see what it is,' she exclaimed scornfully; 'you are afraid I shall meet Mr. Rafford.'

'I certainly object to your meeting him,' he replied sulkily.

'Well, as it happens, he isn't going to be there.'

'So he keeps you acquainted with his movements, does he? I suppose Sandleford would not be a good place for you. But I see now why you are so anxious to go to other places. Where have you arranged to meet him?'

Even he could not help feeling that this speech was completely without justification, but the bitter jealousy

which had been torturing him made him reckless. Gladys shrank as if he had struck her, and then looked into his eyes steadily, her face pale and impassive.

'Thank you,' she said icily; 'you have now freed me from the responsibility of regarding your wishes any longer. For the future I shall go where I like and associate with whom I like. Mr. Rafford is my friend, and I shall see as much of him as I choose. No amount of your coarse insults will affect my conduct with regard to him.'

Presterley glared at her with a burst of violent rage quivering in his frame. She thought he was going to knock her down, and responded to his look with a gaze of proud defiance. But he gradually seemed to master his passion, and without another word he left her.

After this scene the hand of silence lay more heavily on the house than before. Beyond the necessary remarks of everyday life they scarcely spoke to each other. Gladys accepted Lady Seathwaite's invitation, and Presterley went with her when the time came, making no comment. The visit, under the circumstances, was a trying ordeal for both of them; but Presterley's manners were too well known there for his morose demeanour to excite any notice, while Gladys played her part so well that Lady Seathwaite felt justified in announcing in her usual imperial style that the marriage was the greatest possible success. Lord Seathwaite had his doubts on the subject; but then he always took a desponding view of life, and no one paid much attention to him.

From this time Gladys' heart was hardened against her husband. She ceased to be just to him. The old feeling of pity, the consciousness of her power to brighten his gloomy life, were entirely forgotten. She chafed fiercely against the chains which held her to him. If it had been feasible, she would have taken her fate in her hands and

left him. But she was penniless ; Lady Maria could leave her nothing, and she had expectations from no one else. Even if the law would allow her to take such a step, it was out of the question.

Presterley brooded over the matter in silence. Sometimes fierce fits of jealous rage returned ; sometimes he was piteously stricken with the sense of loneliness and loss. He felt hardly treated. He had been faithful to his wife, and had provided her with a comfortable home. No one could possibly blame him if she was dissatisfied. He was hurt and angry with her. And yet in a dumb, helpless way he was longing for something to bring them nearer together.

One day he said to her shortly, 'I have let Rickwood.'

'Indeed !' she replied ; 'when shall I have to turn out ?'

'The first of January.' It was then the beginning of December.

'You don't give me much time,' she said, with a trace of irritation in her voice. 'But it doesn't matter. Where are we going to ?'

'London,' he replied. She stared at him in surprise. She had been preparing for a fight on this question, expecting to be taken away to some remote hunting-box. She was even a little softened by the announcement.

'I don't want to drag you there against your wishes,' she said.

He smiled sarcastically.

'It happens to suit me,' he said ; 'I am going to ride at a lot of meetings round London at the beginning of the year ; and as we have got the Lowndes Square house at a very low rent, it will be cheaper for us to live there than anywhere else at present. You need not be distressed about me.'

The satire of the last remark roused no retort from Gladys. She was so thankful to hear his decision that she took no heed of his repudiation of any consideration for her wishes in arriving at it. The truth was what he had stated. He had begun to ride steeplechases again—a pursuit at which he had obtained considerable celebrity before his marriage. He was a finished horseman, and there was no lack of demand for his services. Now that his hunting was restricted by want of means, he found consolation in the other sport.

They were duly settled in London by the beginning of the New Year. Even Presterley could not help feeling that they were more happily situated. They went their own ways and followed their own pursuits and amusements, and there was far less friction between them. He snarled at her sometimes, and occasionally she blazed up at him; but generally speaking, they were an example of harmonious division.

Rafford called constantly, and spent much time in Mrs. Presterley's society. Presterley never spoke of him directly; though his hints and allusions showed clearly enough what pain the matter gave him. But Gladys felt no remorse now; she had ceased to feel that she owed him anything beyond the practical observances of wifehood.

However, Presterley's mind had plenty to distract it in his racing affairs. He rushed away into the country constantly to ride at steeplechase meetings. He betted heavily, with fluctuating results. His skill as a gentleman jockey began to arrive at a national reputation. But in certain circles dark hints were whispered. There were no open accusations, but men did not conceal a suspicion that he was not altogether 'straight.' The curious running of some of the horses he had ridden was the subject of comment.

However, as Lord St. Pancras remarked when the matter was alluded to in his presence, 'Every fool who loses thinks he has been cheated; and there never yet was a poor devil who rode races whom somebody didn't call a swindler—what?'

## CHAPTER V

### LADY MARIA AS PROPHET

To the astonishment of all his friends, Rafford's industrious habits had continued. He was always on the look-out for work in his profession, and a very fair share came to him. In addition to which he had developed political propensities, and constantly spoke at meetings in various parts of the country.

His life had become an incessant string of occupations. He worked hard and played hard. Whenever he could find the time he hurried into the country for a little hunting or shooting. In London he revived all his old amusements and habits, so far as the restrictions of his work permitted. He began to look quite thin and jaded, and people wondered how he could keep up such a crowded existence.

He had suddenly realised that the door of youth was slowly shutting behind him. His hair was tinged with grey; his constitution was not so robust as it had once been. It had come upon him with a sudden shock that the best part of his life was almost over, and that if he had any particular purpose in the world he had better be about it as quickly as possible.

But he had no particular purpose. His life began to look to him a very empty thing. Other men had wives, children, aspirations, ambitions—something to live and struggle for. He had nothing but the fear of his creditors to make him

work, or the conventional round of amusements, which had long lost their novelty, to attract him to play. The thought drove him to action of any kind, and he worked and played incessantly with the idea of making the most of every minute that was left. Perhaps he might yet find a successful career, an absorbing interest, or a great passion to light up the greyness of things.

But though he thus kept up a game of hide-and-seek with discontent, it was always finding him out, and he began to feel bitter and reckless and ready for any desperate sport which might bring a little more savour into life. When he again met Gladys Presterley, and found that she was also in much the same state of mind, he was diabolically braced and invigorated. They railed at all things together.

They met constantly. He called upon her frequently, and they had long conversations. They arranged meetings, and, with the help of good-natured friends, they organised small theatre-parties, followed by jovial suppers. In public or in private they played at friendship with great persistency. They shut their eyes to the future, and pretended to think that they could go on for ever thus, satisfied with mere pretence.

Once or twice, in the privacy of their own souls, each of them took a hasty peep into the future and as hastily drew the curtain again. Gladys merely realised that she loved him and was with him. Of all other facts she was recklessly oblivious. Let the future bring what it would! She was beginning to feel that so long as she did not lose *him*, she did not greatly care what happened.

He, for his part, had a cooler brain, in spite of the beating of his blood. He was attracted, warmed, fascinated by her. The bonds of sympathy were many between them. She occupied his thoughts a great deal. But all the time he knew that the attraction was in great part ephemeral. He

suspected that if she had been his wife he would have tired of her. He was sufficiently in love to have her constantly in his mind when they were apart, yet not enough to prevent his frequently thinking of other things when he was with her.

It was the old story of gold for silver, and he knew it. For that reason he was full of virtuous resolutions on no account to take advantage of such a weakly defended position. She was so young, so unspotted, that he shrank from the idea of making her different in any way. But experience had taught him the danger of playing with fire, and he knew that they were playing with fire now. For which reason he allowed his mind to dwell on the subject as little as possible.

And thus Fate fiddled while they danced and tried to make light of the fiddler.

One day it occurred to him to call upon Lady Maria Mellins. He had not seen the old lady for a long time, and was grieved to find her aged and failing. She was half-crippled with rheumatism, and had spent the greater part of the winter indoors. But she was brave and cheerful, and had lost none of her quaint peculiarities, so that it seemed as difficult as ever to take her quite seriously even now when she was drifting so obviously towards the great Silence.

Rafford found Walter Flaire regaling her with gossip. He was in his most apologetic mood, for the old lady usually made no concealment of her good-humoured contempt for him, and nothing but his benevolent and universal desire to please all on whom the stamp of fashion had been set would have induced him to face the ordeal of a conversation with her.

'Ah, it's you, Charlie, is it!' she said, her face lighting up with affectionate pleasure; 'it's a long time since I have



seen you, but of course you have got plenty else to do besides running after an old woman. Now don't begin to make excuses. I know exactly what they would be. You've had too much work, and you've had a cold, and you have been out of town a great deal, and all the rest of it. When I was forty years younger there were plenty of young men who came to see me, and they had exactly the same reasons for not visiting the old women they knew. We must all learn that our day is passing—eh, Mr. Flaire?’

Flaire, whose age was as delicate a subject with him as if he had been a woman, looked uncomfortable.

‘It will be a long time before your day is past, Lady Maria,’ he said.

‘I'm afraid Time hasn't your taste for compliments,’ she replied, ‘and he tells me a different story. But tell me how the world is treating you, Charlie? Have you been at Sandleford lately?’

‘Yes, I was there for Christmas,’ Rafford answered; ‘they were all very well.’

‘What a delicious place to spend Christmas in!’ said Flaire gushingly; ‘dear Lady Seathwaite would be at her best on such an occasion.’

‘Yes, she's most in her element in mid-winter,’ remarked Lady Maria.

‘You think her rather cold?’ asked Flaire.

‘Well, she is a little chilly,’ said Lady Maria. ‘But, after all, it's a fault on the right side in these days. From what you have been telling me, it's clear that some of the young women are a good deal too inflammable.’

She sighed, and Flaire glanced uncomfortably at Rafford. Rafford felt vaguely that the conversation referred to him.

‘You can't expect women to be anything else than inflammable when there's such a dangerous fellow as Flaire

about,' he remarked. 'Has he been recounting his conquests to you?'

Flaire rose with dignity.

'I am not perfect,' he said rather pompously, 'and my faults have been very clearly laid before me this afternoon. Lady Maria has explained to me that I am a useless, idle and frivolous person, and ought to know better at my age than to fritter life away as I do. But at any rate I have known how to be friends with women without taking dishonourable advantage of their friendship; and for a man who has lived as much in the world as I have, that is something to be able to say.'

He solemnly took leave of Lady Maria, and left the room.

'Ridiculous creature!' said Lady Maria. 'As if any woman could be in danger from another old woman like that!'

But Rafford remained silent. He knew that Flaire's words were intended as a rebuke for him, and he felt that to be rebuked by such a man with even the smallest semblance of justice, stripped the romance from him pretty effectually, and left him shivering in unheroic nakedness. A professional love-maker? Was that what he was? It was certainly a step or two lower than Flaire.

After all, he was not quite that. But the shaft had found a slight opening in his armour. He had always allowed excuses for every passion except that of vanity. Was he quite certain that vanity had played no part in his own career?

What gossip has that confounded chatterer been telling you?' he asked, with a somewhat defiant spirit.

'Oh, I don't know that it's any use talking about it,' Lady Maria answered, wagging her head as was her custom when perturbed; 'it's no good blaming him. He's only a sort of living newspaper, and publishes what other people

put in his columns. He has been telling me things that worry me about some one I'm very fond of.'

'You'd better tell me,' he answered, feeling rather uneasy; 'it may not be true, and perhaps I can say whether it is or not.'

'Oh, you wouldn't know anything about it. I don't suppose you ever see her. I believe you're always making a fool of yourself after that woman with the drunken husband. I forget her name.'

'It's a kind, truthful world. I suppose you mean Mrs. Glenmure. I haven't spoken to her for more than a year. But who is the other woman you talk about?'

'Gladys, of course. Who else should it be?'

'What has Flaire had the impudence to say about her?' asked Rafford in a low voice.

'Oh, he hasn't said much. He never does, directly. But he has made it pretty clear what is happening. I expected as much. She has been to see me constantly since she came to London, and I can tell pretty well what is going on in her mind. I always knew how things would end if she married that brute. I don't doubt he deserves anything that may happen, but still, I don't want my darling girl to come to grief. Oh, Charlie, if I had had a daughter of my own, I couldn't have loved her more than I do Gladys. And you know I'm not straitlaced or hard in my judgments. The worst people aren't the ones the world punishes most severely, by a long way. But, all the same, it's an awful thing to think of a girl wrecking her life for some momentary folly. Once take a false step, and you're never the same again. You may have far better qualities than many of the women who are most in honour. But all the same, you have begun to fight the world; you are an Ishmaelite, a wolf—you're always on the defensive, consciously or unconsciously, because you know the hunters

are after you ; and it tells on you in a way that can never be avoided.'

Rafford moved uneasily in his chair.

'I expect things are all right,' he said huskily.

'I don't believe they are. She and her husband are living entirely separate lives, and, as far as I can make out, she's playing the fool with some other man. I don't know who he is—I am not certain that it is so—but I am afraid there isn't much room for doubt.'

'But, after all, there is no reason why she shouldn't have a man friend?'

'Oh yes—platonics. I know what platonics lead to—at any rate, with a girl like Gladys. She *can't* do things by halves. If she's unhappy at home, she'll fall in love with the other man. And if she falls in love with him—well, she'll just go where he chooses to take her. There isn't a better, kinder, truer-hearted girl in the world. I know her better than any one, and I can speak with certainty. But she's just that,—work on her feelings—get her under the influence of a strong emotion, good or bad—and there are no lengths she won't go to. If she had married the right man, she'd have been the purest, sweetest, truest wife in the world. Married to the wrong one—well, as I say, she'll go where she's taken.'

'But perhaps the man won't take her anywhere dangerous,' said Rafford feebly, wondering if he were as great a hypocrite as he felt.

'Oh,' said Lady Maria with a sniff of disdain, 'do you think I don't know you men? Don't I know all the old arguments? You aren't another person's keeper ; and a woman can look after herself as well as a man ; and you don't see why you should despise the gifts that the gods send you ; and then you're all so virtuously indignant with the husband—until you marry yourselves.'

'Well, the husband has got something to do with it.'

'I'm not so certain of that, in all cases. A girl marries a man because she wants something from him—love, money, power—what you will. She gets it; and then because she doesn't get more, she thinks she's aggrieved, and doesn't want to fulfil *her* share of the bargain. No, I'm all for fair play on both sides. Mr. Presterley made Gladys a rich woman on condition that she became his wife. Is it fair that she should want to be the wife of some one else?'

'I expect the whole thing has been exaggerated,' Rafford remarked. He was not enjoying the conversation. 'But, anyhow,' he went on defiantly, 'I must say I do think a woman with a husband like Presterley is justified in anything she does.'

'Can't you see that I'm not referring to that point at all?' exclaimed Lady Maria with doubtful accuracy; 'the only thing I am thinking about is what is best for Gladys.'

'Perhaps the man will think of what is best for her too.'

'He isn't a reliable judge. And probably he will only think of himself. He'll have a few scruples, perhaps, because she is young and hitherto innocent, but he'll soon persuade himself that he is doing her no harm.'

'Well, after all, she is old enough to judge what is best,' said Rafford irritably.

'A regular man's argument. I daresay it is all right from your point of view. I suppose no man thinks it necessary to save a woman from herself.'

This remark struck Rafford almost in the light of a new idea. He gave up the argument, and turned the conversation to other matters. They talked and joked in the old fashion; and when he rose to go, the old lady looked at him with loving eyes.

'Dear boy,' she said, 'it was good of you to come and

see a stupid old woman and be bored with her grumblings. But the people in the world whom I love are getting very few nowadays, and I have to pile all my affection on to them. If it isn't too great a burden to bear, come soon and have some more of it.'

Rafford pressed her hand, while a strange mist gathered before his eyes, and he turned to leave the room with a curious, dazed feeling, through which he seemed to be conscious of a voice clanging in his brain, like a bell, the words—'I suppose no man thinks it necessary to save a woman from herself.'

## CHAPTER VI

### THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

GLADYS PRESTERLEY sat at the luncheon-table alone with her husband. He seldom lunched at home, but he had got up late that morning, and had not gone out as usual. She had gone to bed the night before previous to his return home, and had not seen him till now. He had slept in his dressing-room, a sure sign that he had come home drunk.

He looked pale, and seemed fidgety and nervous. But he was more talkative than usual.

'I had another run of bad luck at poker last night,' he said slowly, his eyes wandering shiftily about the room.

'Had you?' she replied, with a cold indifference. She had no active feeling against him now. She simply tried to avoid thinking of him as much as possible. He was still her husband, and she admitted the fact as one of the inevitable penalties of life. She had come to regard her duties as a wife much in the light in which a man might view some dull office work which he was bound to—a thing to be conscientiously discharged, and forgotten as soon as possible.

'I was wondering,' he went on, in the same hesitating way—'that is, I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind helping me a little under the present circumstances. It would mean a temporary inconvenience to you, but I'll put it right later on.'

'I shall be very glad to assist you in any way I can, though I don't see what I can do,' she answered, with the same indifference. 'The only thing I can give you is advice to leave off playing poker, but I don't suppose you will take that.'

'I will indeed,' he replied eagerly. 'I'll promise not to touch another card. But what I wanted to say was—well, you know that diamond necklace I gave you last year?'

'Yes.'

'Well, the fact is I'm awfully pushed for ready money, and I don't know where to raise it—and, of course, those stones are very valuable—and——' he stopped, and looked at her helplessly. She burst out laughing.

'You mean that you would like to sell them.'

'Well, if you would let me raise a little money on them—just for a short time—I shall soon be able to get them back again——'

She had never seen him so humble since the days of his courtship. The sight rather amused her. As to feeling sorry for him, that capacity seemed dead in her.

'Of course you can have them,' she said. 'Any of the jewellery that you have given me you are quite welcome to.'

His face flushed.

'It's awfully good of you,' he said.

'Oh, it's nothing,' she replied. 'I should never think of wearing them.'

She sent for the necklace and handed it over to him. He took it, and was leaving the room, when he suddenly turned and said—

'Why do you say you would never think of wearing the things I have given you?'

Gladys had made the remark without any thought. She possessed an abundance of jewellery given her by various



people, and she had no particular taste for wearing her husband's, though she had not meant to imply this. She hesitated. A dull flush of anger came over his face. The old jealous pain was revived.

'I see,' he said. 'It's because *I* gave them to you. No doubt there are other men who will give you things that you will value more for their sake.'

She turned very white under this sneer. Of course she knew to whom he referred. She could not see the struggle going on in his heart between jealousy and yearning and shame at his own brutality, for even he realised to some extent the cruelty of the insinuation. She felt a wild wave of anger and defiance sweep through her, but she made no reply, and he went out and shut the door.

Soon after she went upstairs and dressed to go out. She had arranged to visit the National Gallery with Rafford that afternoon, and was to meet him there in a short time. She felt absolutely light-hearted now; for it appeared to her that her husband had destroyed the last shred of a claim upon her, and she seemed to have lost all feeling of responsibility. She sang as she dressed. She felt utterly careless and reckless. She did not look forward at all. What might happen in the future was a matter of perfect indifference to her. She almost believed that she had suddenly become happy.

When she met Rafford in the National Gallery, he was quite startled by her appearance. Though he had always admired her to a moderate degree, he had never expected to see her look so charming as she did to-day. She wore a long cloak, trimmed with fur, and her fair face seemed to nestle down into its soft texture, while its rich, dark hue set off the pale brightness of her hair. Her cheeks were glowing with unusual colour, and her grey eyes looked large and dark and sparkling through her delicate veil, which barely

touched her smiling red mouth, whose curved lips parted over gleaming white teeth. She took a small gloved hand from her sable muff and stretched it out to him. He held it closely for a minute, looking into her eyes with a half-troubled look, which she answered with a gaily reckless smile. These looks and hand-pressures had grown common between them. Though they had never trodden on forbidden ground, they had often looked over the hedge.

Rafford had come, braced to virtuous resolves. He had at last forced himself to face the situation in which they stood. His code of morals was irregular, but simple. In his opinion love justified everything. Was he in love with her? In spite of the force with which she appealed to almost every side of his nature, he felt a doubt on the point. If he was going to begin making love to her, he felt that, even according to his own code, nothing but a lifelong devotion would justify him. Was he confident of her inspiring such a devotion? He knew that he was not.

And so he had made up his mind that he was bound to bring their intercourse to an end. He had no illusions as to the conclusion to which it must inevitably lead. It would be a struggle to give her up. But for her sake he was bound to make it.

Now he had touched her hand and looked into her eyes, and the good resolutions were half smothered in the whirl of mad thoughts that surged through his brain.

They wandered through the galleries and made a pretence of looking at the pictures. Gladys knew little about ancient art. All her tastes, all the studies of her life, were essentially modern. It was owing to this that her sense of proportion was so deficient, and the deficiency was the cause of those ill-balanced enthusiasms with which she had so often given him a slight emotion of weariness. But now, in the presence of the great masterpieces, even her

exuberant spirit was chastened, and her remarks took the form of inquiry rather than of criticism. Rafford could have given her a good deal of information if he had been in the mood. But he seemed distracted, and made careless answers to her questions. Soon they left the subject altogether, and, sitting down in an almost deserted room, turned to the more attractive topic of themselves.

‘I wonder if any one has seen us here,’ she remarked.

‘What does it matter if they do?’ he replied.

‘Oh, I don’t care. I believe people have begun to talk about me sometimes, though—the dear things!’

“*Semper formosis fabula pœna fuit*,” he responded. She had no idea what the quotation meant, but it impressed her with a sense of his scholarship.

‘What a lot you know!’ she said, looking at him with a smile.

‘I’m endeavouring to qualify as a prig and a pedant,’ he replied. ‘I am thinking of trying to get into Parliament, and it might help me there.’

‘Oh, I hope you will!’ she exclaimed. ‘I know you can have a great career if you will take the trouble. How splendid it will be! And you will be able to tell me all that goes on, and come to me to be cheered up when things are wrong. I shall watch you climbing to fame, and shall feel that I am your friend and know the secrets of your ambition, and it will give me a personal interest and an occupation such as I have wanted all my life.’

He felt that things were made hard for him as he listened to her words and looked at her glowing face. How could he explain to her that it was better for them to part? Why should he refuse this delicious comradeship that she offered? She saw no danger in it. Why should he suggest it to her mind?

And, then, suppose she admitted the danger, and still

wished to go on in the hope of avoiding it? But if it came to acknowledging so much as that, things would arrive at a crisis at once, and he wanted to avoid a crisis. He was not sufficiently sure of himself to face it.

'I expect you would soon be tired of the subject,' he remarked. 'Politics, like most other things, chiefly consists of dry details. You would soon be bored with them—and with me.'

'Ah, you don't understand!' she exclaimed. 'The actual facts don't matter at all, however dry they may be. It is the spirit that runs through any deeds which determines their value. Perhaps only a woman could comprehend what it would mean to have a friend gradually developing and growing and rising under one's own eyes alone, so to speak; to see a man in whom one took an interest shedding the skin of indifference and laziness and want of purpose, and to feel that no one else saw it or had a hand in it. I think you are the strongest man I have ever known, and I am only a feeble woman. But still I know what your weak points are—your exaggerated contempt for things, your want of a desire to do justice to your own powers; and if I could feel that my influence were just giving the necessary touch to make you rouse yourself and do what you were meant to do, it would bring something into my life which the gods have denied me so far.'

'It is very good of you to care what becomes of me,' he said in a low voice. 'But I have no claim on your interest. You have your own troubles to fight. Why should you think about mine?'

'Can't you see that my own troubles are chiefly due to the want of some one to take an interest in? Don't you know that a woman's ambition always acts best through some one else? It may only be vanity and love of power, but it is so.'

'I think it is the nobility of self-sacrifice,' he replied, in the same low tone. He did not dare to look at her. The mad confusion in his brain was growing fiercer than ever. He began to realise more clearly the wealth that he might gain from her, the pitiful, starved return which he could make for it. She had only spoken of friendship, but he knew that she could not refuse him something far deeper if he asked for it. And yet, though his pulse was beating and his heart quivering, he knew that his brain was critically weighing her in the balance, and that half an hour after they parted he would be lightly thinking of some other amusement or occupation. He faced the prospect of having to regard himself as a scoundrel. But even that seemed but a feeble chain to hold him.

'We shall have to be going directly,' he said. 'The gallery shuts early in the winter, and it is nearly time now.'

'We may as well go,' she answered, slowly rising. 'Of course you will come back and have some tea.'

He did not reply at once. She knew what was passing in his mind by the commotion which had begun in her own. Nothing unusual had been said or done, but they seemed to have arrived unexpectedly at the edge of the abyss. She was startled, but not frightened. Social duty, reputation, everything that had been of importance before, suddenly seemed to have been eclipsed by a vastly greater thing. She had talked with her lips of *his* future; but with her heart she had placed her own in his hands.

'Yes, I suppose I may as well come,' he answered slowly. They walked through the galleries and reached the entrance, almost in silence.

Rafford called a hansom, and they got in and drove away. They did not talk much. Her shoulder rested lightly against his arm, and the swaying of the cab sometimes increased the pressure, but they sat quite naturally

and still. The dusk was gathering rapidly, and the cold, bleak streets looked grey and desolate. The passers-by hurried with bent heads against a searching wind. Gladys trembled a little, and attributed it to the cold, though the thumping of her heart seemed to mock the suggestion.

'I shall have a chilly drive to-morrow if it is like this,' she said. 'Lord St. Pancras wants me to go to Sandown on his drag. I think I should prefer the train.'

'I am going to Sandown too. I haven't had a holiday for some time. Shall we go together?'

'I shall have to go with my husband if I go by train. He is going to ride one of Lord St. Pancras's horses for him. But I don't mind the cold. I think I shall drive.'

Rafford was relieved by her answer. He had regretted the proposal almost as soon as he had made it. The occasion was too public to make his conspicuous attendance on her desirable. Moreover, what had become of the resolutions to avoid her? Even now he was still trying to keep them alive. He felt as if he were constantly setting a drunken man on his legs and as constantly watching him fall down again. The thought made him smile, which was a good thing. Danger lay in seriousness.

They arrived at the house in Lowndes Square, and went up to the drawing-room. The servants were putting up the shutters and bringing in the lights.

'Bring up tea at once, please,' Gladys said; 'and if any once else calls, say that I am not at home.'

As the men left the room, Rafford saw a significant grin pass between them. The sight angered him, and brought him back to sanity for the moment. But he turned and saw Gladys, divested of her hat and cloak, brushing the waving curls from her forehead with her slender hand, and looking at him with wide, serious eyes. The mad turmoil began again.

After tea had been laid and the servants had withdrawn, one of the lamps began to smoke. Gladys impatiently turned it out. The other required regulating, and, when Rafford went to it, his fingers were shaking so much that he inadvertently extinguished it also.

'It doesn't matter,' Gladys said. 'This roaring fire gives us quite enough light. I can't be bothered with having those stupid creatures back again.'

She gave him a cup of tea, but he left it untasted. She drank some herself, and then put down the cup and went over to the piano. He sat still and stared into the fire.

'Won't you play something?' he asked. The spirit of freakish humour within him woke up again for a moment at his own words. It seemed as if he had asked the orchestra to strike up for the romantic part of the drama. He was so haunted by a sense of unreality, that he felt that there ought to be a moaning of fiddlestrings behind the scenes. Then Gladys' voice answered him back out of the half light, and the sense of reality became painfully acute again.

'What shall I play?' she asked.

'Something ridiculous and light, for God's sake,' he replied.

This answer did not strike her as curious. Even music seemed a thing to be approached with caution just then. She rattled out a popular music-hall tune, and they both laughed in a way that might have suggested hysteria. Rafford began to wonder if the situation were not horribly ridiculous.

Gladys played snatches of various comic operas with much superfluous execution and a good many false notes. Then she stopped short with a final discordant crash.

'I'm dreadfully out of practice,' she said.

'Why don't you work at it more?' he asked. 'You might play so well if you liked. You have been giving me

good advice; you ought to set me an example. There's nothing like work for making one forget this silly old world.'

'It doesn't make me forget it,' she replied. 'It makes me see it all the more clearly. I don't look at the world as you do—or pretend to.'

'How do you mean?'

'Why, you always talk as if the world were a hopeless fraud, and as if one's only chance of being happy were to get out of it. I don't believe that. I believe the world might be a very good place under some circumstances.'

'Yes, but if you haven't got the circumstances?'

'It isn't by working at the thing I like best that I can forget them. What is the good of playing when it only reminds me that there is no one in my life who cares to listen?'

'But there *is* some one.'

He had risen from his chair and looked at her as he spoke. The firelight made the shadows dance upon her face, and he could not see her expression. Nothing was definite except her large eyes fixed on him through the gloom. She struck a few disjointed chords on the keys.

'If I practise when my husband is in the house, he always grumbles about it,' she said.

'I am very sorry for you,' he said awkwardly. Then there was a long silence, only broken by the sound of stray notes, over which she softly ran her fingers. He moved up to the end of the piano furthest from her.

'Play something more,' he said.

'By royal command,' she replied, with a laugh that sounded rather unsteady. Then she began to play again, very softly. She played in the same irregular way as before—scraps of operas, songs, fragments of symphonies, anything and everything from Brahms to Offenbach.



Finally she drifted into one of Chopin's Preludes. Rafford leaned upon the piano and watched her face intently. Once or twice she looked at him, and then dropped her eyes to the keys again. At last the soft, plaintive melody stopped, and she sat still. He heard a quavering sigh. The blood throbbed and drummed in his temples. He moved close to her.

'I ought not to have asked you to play,' he said, almost in a whisper. She looked up at him, her lips parted and quivering, her eyes fixed on his face with fervent intensity. He drew a sharp breath, as if he were half suffocating, and bent towards her. She sprang to her feet with a wild flash in her eyes. The next moment their lips were joined together, and they were locked in a close embrace.

A wave of blood seemed to surge across his brain and blot out every thought. But as it ebbed, his fancy heard a mocking voice whisper in his ear Lady Maria's words, 'I suppose no man would think it necessary to save a woman from herself.'

Almost with violence he drew back, holding her from him, and glared into her eyes. Then he burst into a savage laugh.

'How ridiculous this is!' he said.

Across the smiling surface of her eyes a heavy cloud swept. Her face puckered up into an expression that smote him to the heart. But he crushed down the soft feeling with bitter rage.

'What do you mean?' she faltered.

'You *will* insist on taking me too seriously,' he answered, in the same unnatural voice. 'You know I'm always doing this sort of thing. I *can't* be serious about anything.'

He spoke the words without having the faintest idea of what he was saying. It seemed to him as if some one else were talking gibberish in the dark. They struck her like a

blow. She shrank away from him shuddering, staggered back to the sofa with a sob, and crouched upon it in a huddled heap, with her face buried in the cushions. He seized his hat, and, without looking at her, hurried from the room.

He realised nothing distinctly till he found himself on the door-step, with the front door shut behind him and the cold wind scorching his hot face. He staggered up against the side of the porch. For a minute he passed through a hideous struggle, fighting with a wild desire to go back to her, to take her in his arms again and explain the false cruelty of his words. He felt that he could not give her up like this. But gradually he mastered himself, and his brain grew clear again, painting the facts to him with bitter, cynical mockery. He became quite calm.

'Well,' he muttered, with the smile of a man in pain, 'it's a new experience to prove oneself a Joseph. And the best of the joke is that she will never forgive me.'

The passers-by who glanced at his hard, drawn face by the lamplight as he moved slowly along the pavement, would hardly have supposed him to be a man enjoying a joke.

## CHAPTER VII

### ON THE OTHER SIDE

GLADYS sat motionless on the sofa, with her head drooping and her arms hanging loosely. The fire had burned low, and the only light in the room came from the red mass of glowing coals, while the only sounds were the occasional dropping of a cinder and the ticking of the clock, save when the rattle of passing wheels, or the echo of a human voice, came faintly from outside.

In the darkness and the silence was there any eye to see the awful agony of a human soul?

She had no idea how long she had sat there. Presently she heard the slam of the front door and the sound of voices downstairs. She moved a little, raised her head, and mechanically adjusted one of the sofa cushions, which had fallen out of its place.

Footsteps came up the stairs, the door opened, letting in a shaft of yellow light, and her husband's voice said, 'Gladys.'

'Yes,' she answered, passing her handkerchief over her dry lips.

'Why are you sitting in the dark?' asked Presterley, as he advanced into the room.

'The lamps smoked, so I turned them out. I am tired, and have been resting.'

Presterley lighted a candle. She leaned back against the cushions and watched him listlessly.

'Your friend Rafford left his gloves in the hall,' he said, with a tone of suppressed bitterness. 'At least I suppose they are his, as I understand that no one else has been here. You had better give them to him the next time he comes.'

'Mr. Rafford will not come here again.'

Presterley turned abruptly, and looked at her with a more animated expression on his face than she had ever seen there before.

'Have you quarrelled with him?' he asked. His voice shook as he spoke. His face betokened eager anxiety. Gladys again passed her handkerchief over her lips.

'We haven't quarrelled,' she replied, with elaborate indifference, 'but I have got rather bored with him. He won't come here again.'

Presterley stood looking at her for a moment, while the blood rushed to his face. Even beneath the dull weight of misery and horror and self-contempt she experienced a faint emotion of surprise at seeing him so much moved. The feeling of resentment which had been growing in her against him for so long had quite died out for the time. His presence roused nothing but a slight sensation of weariness.

He came slowly across the room and sat down on the sofa beside her.

'I'm glad you have got sick of him,' he said in his deliberate way. 'I never liked him.'

He still seemed nervous and ill at ease. The fact was that he had a vague idea that he would like to 'make it up,' and did not quite know how to begin. For the first time, he had felt that day that she had some cause of complaint against him.

'I was awfully obliged to you about that necklace,' he said nervously.

She could not resist a faint smile. The necklace seemed so ridiculously insignificant just now.

'Oh, that was nothing,' she said. 'I hope you got the money you wanted?'

'Yes,' he answered, with a manner of unusual eagerness, 'but it is only a temporary matter—it is really. If I win this race to-morrow—and I can't very well lose it—it means a small fortune in my pocket. Smith has worked the commission splendidly for me, and I got a big lump of money on at a good price before they really tumbled to the fact that any one was seriously backing the mare. I was afraid I might have spoiled the market for St. Pancras, but I find he wasn't thinking of putting much on the race anyhow. You see, it isn't an important race; and as they knew nothing about Queen Mab, they had let her off with an absurdly light weight, and no one had thought much about it. Of course, she'll start at a very short price now, but the money is on, so it will be all right. There's nothing else has a chance except Crusader, and he is carrying a stone more, so I'm not afraid of him, even if he starts, which isn't certain. The mare's in tiptop condition, and I'm sure we shall easily walk away from the whole lot. And then, the very moment I get the money, you shall have your necklace back—I swear you shall. And I'll promise never to touch another card—I will, honestly. I'll set to work and have all my business put straight, even if I have to sell Rickwood. I'm determined that if anything happens to me, you shall find everything comfortable for you.'

Gladys listened to this unusually fluent outburst with rising astonishment, mingled with other conflicting emotions. Presterley's flushed face wore an anxious, contrite look. His manner was still ungraceful and half-sullen, but he was evidently deeply moved. The long months of dull selfishness and neglect had never disturbed

his conscience; but this trivial matter of the necklace seemed to weigh upon his mind. She was overwhelmed with a rush of the old feeling of heartfelt pity, mingled with a faint remorse.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'if only you had thought of things like this a little sooner, how much you might have saved us both!'

'I don't see that it has all been my fault,' he began, in the old grumbling, defiant tone; and then, as if anxious to be conciliatory, he added hastily, 'I say, I'm afraid you're awfully knocked up. You look so pale and tired. Can I do anything for you?'

It was the first time since their marriage that he had ever expressed a thought concerning her health or happiness. The tears flooded her eyes.

'It is nothing,' she answered, with a break in her voice. 'I am going upstairs to lie down.'

'But you're coming down to dinner?' he asked, with the same eagerness.

'I don't want any dinner,' she said. 'I shall go to bed very early.'

'Oh, but don't leave me all alone,' he begged, in an imploring tone. 'I'm down in my luck to-night, and I can't stand it. I *must* be in good form to-morrow, and if I'm alone I shall be at that cursed bottle again—I know I shall. I don't know what has come over my nerves, but they're all over the shop to-night. Don't leave me alone. I must win that race, and then I can get your necklace back.'

'Don't worry about the necklace,' she said. 'It really doesn't matter.'

'Oh, but it does. If anything happened to me, I shouldn't like you to have lost it.'

She looked at him with surprise and some dismay. It

was clear that the drink was beginning to tell on his nerves.

‘Why do you keep on talking like that?’ she said. ‘Nothing is likely to happen to you.’

‘You never can tell,’ he replied nervously. ‘I tell you, I’m out of spirits to-night, and that makes a fellow imagine all sorts of things. Do go and dress now, and come to dinner. I swear I’ll drink nothing but claret if you do, and not much of that.’

‘Very well,’ she said, with a wan effort to smile. ‘But you must not mind if I am a little dull. I have got a bad headache.’

‘You *are* a brick!’ he exclaimed. ‘You needn’t talk or do anything. It’s only just to have you there. I can’t bear to be alone to-night. And please don’t put anything round your throat. I don’t want to see anything there till the necklace comes back.’

Gladys rose to her feet. ‘Anything you like,’ she said with a quavering laugh. Then she suddenly burst into a flood of hysterical weeping and rushed from the room.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LACHESIS INTERVENES

THE numbers were up and the course had been cleared. The winter's day was drawing towards its close, and the dingy fog, which had hung about all the afternoon, seemed to be gradually settling down like a thick veil over everything. The attendance was small. The enclosure was dotted with isolated groups, and the stands would have held far larger crowds than were gathered in and before them. An unimposing line of carriages faced the course, and round them was clustered an insignificant throng. The mist had prevented a good view of the racing; and as it seemed likely now to make events altogether invisible, many of the spectators had already gone home.

Scarcely any of the traditional humours of the race-course were to be seen. A nigger minstrel disconsolately thrummed his banjo near Lord St. Pancras' drag, and another pair of musicians twanged their guitars and poured out husky voices in would-be melody. A besotted, horse-faced man appealed to an apathetic handful of listeners to give him twopence for the name of the winner of the next race, recounting triumphantly his former success as a prophet; which indeed appeared to be so remarkable as to give rise to remark on the virtue which had prevented his supporting his own prescience financially, and had left him in apparent poverty. The hoarse cries of the bookmakers



and the bustle in front of the stands were the only tokens that any one took much interest in the business of the day.

Rafford, in the enclosure, glanced across the course at a female figure which he could dimly discern seated on the box-seat of a coach.

'Poor little woman!' he said to himself. 'I wonder if she is hating me very much.'

He did not like the idea of being hated by her at all, and he had to struggle with a sigh as he turned to respond to the remark of some friend who addressed him.

Lady Woolton, who was walking about with another man, seized upon her husband on his way back from the paddock, and drew him on one side.

'Tommy,' she said, 'I don't believe there is a word of truth in the gossip you heard about Mr. Rafford and Gladys. She is over there on Lord St. Pancras's coach, and he hasn't been across to speak to her once the whole day. I have been watching them. I think it is disgraceful that people should talk as they do.'

Sir Tommy gazed at Rafford through his eyeglass.

'I hope it is all right,' he said. 'Anyhow, I am glad they have got more sense than to flaunt about together in public.'

'You silly old goose,' she said, 'there wouldn't be anything in it if they did. I've been flaunting about with Mr. Fleming for the last half-hour, and I'm going to do it again. But no one will think anything of it.'

'No, but hang it all, I'm here, and I do count for something.'

'Precious little,' she answered, with a laugh and an affectionate glance. 'Now go away and put a little money on Queen Mab. I'll give you leave to bet a little on this occasion, as it's such a certainty.'

'I'm not sure that it is,' he said. 'I don't like the look of Crusader.'

'Mr. Fleming says that Mr. Presterley has backed her very highly, and that if he doesn't win he'll be pretty nearly ruined. I hope he will win for poor Gladys' sake.'

'Well, at any rate he won't try to lose on *this* occasion,' said Sir Thomas rather savagely, as he turned away. He had no high opinion of Presterley's good faith.

Lord St. Pancras passed through the enclosure and swaggered across the course with an important air. He reached the drag and climbed up behind Gladys.

'We're all right, Mrs. Presterley,' he said. 'We can't lose. Tubby Gregson is going to ride Crusader, and he'll be the only dangerous one, but I don't think even Tubby will be able to get him home first. Your husband will make the pace so hot that Crusader will soon tire under all that weight—what?'

'I hope so,' said Gladys, with an effort to appear interested. She was pale and thoughtful, and had not talked much.

'Here they come,' said another man, as the gleam of a coloured jacket showed faintly amongst the trunks of the trees. The string of horsemen filed out into the course and came down towards them. A big, handsome brown horse trotted calmly in front, his rider jogging ungracefully in the saddle, with his shoulders up to his ears.

'That's Crusader,' said Lord St. Pancras. 'Tubby Gregson sits a horse like a butcher-boy, but he can make them go farther and faster than most people—what?'

Two more horses passed, contemptuously criticised by his lordship. Then a beautiful bright bay mare came dancing and sidling down the course with Presterley in the saddle, resplendent in crimson and white. It was Queen Mab.

'Isn't she a picture?' asked Lord St. Pancras.

'Is she the favourite?' inquired Gladys.

'Rather! They're only laying six to four. I'd back her gladly at evens—what?'

There were only five starters altogether. They performed their preliminary canter, but the fog was too thick to enable the occupants of the drag to see them jump. However, they all agreed that Queen Mab moved beautifully, though Crusader also came in for a good deal of admiration. The start was on the far side of the course, and the competitors turned and trotted away into the fog.

'What a confounded nuisance it is!' said Lord St. Pancras. 'We shall see nothing of the race. It will be ticklish work for them too. Why, you can't see the fences a hundred yards off—what?'

There was a long pause of anxious expectation. The bell could not be rung, as it was impossible for any one at the Stand to know if the start had taken place. But presently the sound of hoofs on the turf behind told them that the starter was cantering up on his hack, and the ringing of the bell immediately followed. The race had clearly begun.

Impatient exclamations were uttered, heads were craned forward, and eyes stared helplessly into the gloom. At last a faint sound, like pattering thunder, began to grow louder. They were coming.

A dim figure emerged from the fog and raced towards them. As it drew near they recognised the crimson-and-white jacket. It was Presterley. He shot past. Queen Mab was striding along freely, her jockey motionless on her back.

'By Jove, Mrs. Presterley, what a horseman he is!—what?' exclaimed the owner of Queen Mab.

Under the silk cap which half concealed her husband's

face Gladys could see the muscles of his jaw standing out, just as they had done on the day when she watched him riding away from the door at Sandlesford.

Crusader was only about two lengths behind.

'Confound Tubby!' grumbled Lord St. Pancras. 'How the deuce has he managed to keep as close as that? They're going a devil of a pace—what?'

The remaining three horses came labouring by, a long way behind. They were evidently completely outpaced. Then the cavalcade disappeared into the fog again.

'Crusader can't keep going at that pace,' said Lord St. Pancras. 'The weight will begin to tell along the other side. I shouldn't be surprised if Queen Mab came in practically alone—what?'

He continued to keep up his own spirits by these intermittent monologues, but it was clear that he was not easy in his mind. However, there was nothing to do but wait events. Even Gladys was in a flutter of excitement. Her sad thoughts were for the moment banished. Furthermore, she was roused by the unaccustomed sensation of hearing her husband praised, and of finding him, even for a moment, holding a position of importance in the eyes of his fellows. She had been forced so often to struggle with the inclination to be ashamed of him, that this new experience took her by surprise. She felt more softly towards him than she had done for many long months, and the wave of pity which had ebbed and flowed again was mingled with something that was almost affection.

Meanwhile Presterley was riding through the gloom with a stern expression on his rigid face. The result of the race might mean something very like ruin to him; but of that he scarcely thought. His mind was only bent on the recovery of Gladys' necklace.

He raced down the hill and cleared the fences that came

so close together along the bottom. He could still hear the beat of Crusader's hoofs close behind him. Every second he expected them to grow fainter. But, if anything, they seemed to be drawing closer.

Queen Mab was still moving freely and jumping like a deer, but the strain was beginning to tell upon her. After clearing the water she rolled about a little, and he heard the thud of Crusader landing at her heels. Along this side of the course he had expected to gallop away from the horse. But his pursuer seemed rather to be gaining on him.

At the open ditch Queen Mab blundered slightly. She was beginning to be distressed. Crusader was a stride nearer.

As they reached the bend the horse's head drew nearly level with Presterley's saddle. He felt that Queen Mab was labouring under him. Both animals were beginning to fail, but Crusader was still creeping up.

Surely the weight must do its work when they reached the hill! But he began to feel doubtful. Queen Mab's stride was shortening and her head sinking lower. He was riding for Gladys' necklace, and he meant to win—fairly or otherwise.

The fog was all around them. The spectators were far away. The other competitors were lost in the obscurity behind. If he won and an objection were lodged, there would be no evidence to support it, and his word was as good as Gregson's.

As they rounded the bend he suddenly steered into the middle of the course, carrying Crusader with him. Gregson poured out a string of fiery language, but Presterley took no notice. With the same rigid look on his face he continued to bore and hustle the opposing horse as they approached the next fence.

Gregson hurled a volley of threats and abuse at him. Presterley uttered no sound ; but as he sat down to ride at the jump, he pulled the mare deliberately across Crusader's line, shutting him into the corner of the fence. Gregson had to choose between stopping and risking an almost certain fall. With a furious curse he drove the spurs into Crusader's flanks.

There was a shock ; a crash of breaking twigs ; and horses and men rolled headlong on the turf beyond the fence.

Up at the Stand the crowd was anxiously waiting for some signs of the horses. It seemed a long time since they had disappeared into the fog. The party on the drag stood up and stared into the veil of obscurity.

At last the sound of hoofs came faintly to their ears. A horseman gradually shaped himself out of the mist and wavered towards them.

'What are the colours ?' exclaimed Gladys eagerly. 'Is it Crusader or Queen Mab ?'

Lord St. Pancras dropped his cigar with an exclamation of astonishment.

'It is neither of them,' he said.

One of the despised three was galloping past the winning-post, hailed by a shout of humorous triumph from the ring. The party gazed at each other in blank dismay.

A riderless horse followed, its bridle flapping loosely. They recognised Queen Mab. Gladys' pale face grew deadly white.

'I wonder what has happened,' she murmured.

Tommy Woolton had come across just before the race with a message to her from his wife, and, finding a vacant place on the roof of the coach, had remained. He quickly slipped down to the ground.

'It's sure to be all right, Mrs. Presterley,' he said in a

cheerful voice. 'I expect Presterley is walking up, but I'll go and see.'

He started off at a brisk run. Two other horsemen came by, their horses showing every symptom of acute distress. Finally Gregson arrived on Crusader. He had lost his cap, and his white breeches were mud-stained and discoloured.

Gladys watched them with trembling lips. The crowd had surged on to the course, and many people were hastening away down the hill. She saw Rafford come out of the enclosure and move quickly in the same direction. He glanced towards her, and then hastily looked away again. She sat down abruptly and toyed nervously with the card she held in her fingers, while her heart thumped against her ribs, and her brain seemed whirling round.

Rafford hurried down the course, threading his way through the crowd. He heard excited questions and vague answers all round him, but did not attend to them. Presently a horse's hoofs sounded on the turf, and a mounted policeman galloped past him. He broke into a run.

Half-way down the hill he met Woolton, who was hastening through the stream of race-goers, his usually jovial face overcast with an expression of deep concern. He sprang forward toward Rafford.

'Oh, Charlie,' he exclaimed, 'for God's sake, come with me to Mrs. Presterley! Her husband is killed!'

## BOOK V





## CHAPTER I

### THE UNDER SIDE OF LIFE

IN a small public-house, situated in an obscure street in Chelsea, there was an old-fashioned parlour opening into the bar. On the leather-covered seats, which ran round three sides of the room, various men were sitting, chiefly members of the working class. They were engaged in a general conversation, in which all present took some part except one man, who sat silently alone in a corner with a glass on the table in front of him. His clothes were very shabby and threadbare, and his face was pinched and thin. He puffed at his pipe and listened to the talk around him with an abstracted air, which showed that his brain scarcely digested what fell upon his ear. Once or twice one of the other men addressed a remark to him, and he was evidently not altogether a stranger amongst them; but apparently they did not look for much sociability in him, and for the most part they left him to his own meditations.

It was scarcely three years since Nigel Maystone had vanished from the circle of his old acquaintances, and his appearance showed that he had been through much in that time. He was listening vaguely to the voices of the present, and his mind was travelling back over the past.

One man was taking the lead in the conversation, the rest acting as chorus to him.

‘What I sez is this,’ he declared: ‘Bill’s a good enough

chap in 'is way, but 'e wants to be too much of a toff. I met 'im this evening up in the King's Road, and I sez, "Well, Bill, old man, 'ow goes it?" and gives 'im a punch in the ribs just friendly-like, and 'e gets the needle at once, and sez, "Look 'ere, old man, you're a *blanky* fine fellow, but I'm *blanked* if I'm going to be messed about in that way by a *blank* like you. Just remember as my customers is all about 'ere, and I've got a reputation to keep up." Now, don't you call it ridiculous for a man to speak to an old pal in that way? I ask you now if it ain't silly?"

The chorus signified their assent, and the orator continued to expatiate on Bill's deficiencies.

Maystone took a sip at his glass of whisky-and-water. It tasted like spirits of wine dashed with vitriol, but it put a little life into him. He felt tired and listless. It was an unaccustomed luxury to get even this poisonous compound to drink. For many weeks past he had been battling with starvation, and he had not yet recovered from the effects of the struggle.

His experiences had been varied during these three years—varied in degree, though monotonous in kind. He had tried his hand at many things. There had been short periods of comparative comfort, and long gaps of want and despair. He had kept tradesmen's books. He had canvassed for advertisements. He had sold matches in the street. He had slept on seats on the Embankment, and had passed the night in the casual ward of workhouses. He had tasted the extremes of hunger and cold and misery. He had feasted on threepence and drunk ambrosial nectar in a glass of bitter beer. A plate of sausages and mashed potatoes had seemed to him the ultimate refinement of good living, and a fourpenny bed in a common lodging-house had appealed to him with an unwonted aspect of

comfort. Three years had passed, and he was more than ten years older.

The talkative man was continuing his remarks.

'It's all very well to talk,' he said, 'but what I want to know is, what are all these *blanky* Governments and politicians going to do for us? I don't get a bob a week more for all their bloomin' elections and speeches. Give me a pot of beer and a real good twopenny smoke, and I'm as good a man as any of 'em, and they can just manage their *blanky* politics as they like. I'm not going to interfere.'

The chorus seemed less unanimous on this question, and a discussion arose.

Maystone looked back on his own political days as on some faded dream. His efforts had died almost in their birth. As soon as he had seriously attempted to join in the fray, he had found himself totally unable to work with his Socialist guides. He had liked and respected some of them personally. But, rightly or wrongly, he had been unable to accept their doctrines or to approve of their methods. Further, he had not the self-assertion sufficient to allow him to elbow his way to the front amongst any band of political enthusiasts. His few speeches had been absolute failures, not even exciting active ridicule. With the more urgent question of obtaining a livelihood constantly pressing on his attention, he had not kept intact his early eagerness for abstract ideas. Gradually he had lost touch with his associates. Batton had married Miss Chilvey, and had gone with her to Australia, to seek fortune there. No one else took much interest in him except Rennett, and Rennett's interest was purely of a hostile nature. He had pursued Maystone with bitter personal animosity on every occasion on which they had met. And Maystone was now left to reflect sadly on his early ambitions, with the knowledge that his hopes had ended in disillusionment, and that the

sole gain from his efforts had been the fierce hatred of a man whom he had never injured.

An elderly man had joined in the general conversation.

'When I was a boy,' he said, 'my master as I was apprenticed to was a tremendous Radical. He used to make me read some wonderful fierce newspapers to him every Sunday morning. He was a shoemaker—a snob.'

'There's a many snobs as ain't in the shoemakin' trade,' remarked a solemn-looking man beside him. The chorus applauded this aphorism.

The more he looked at things, the more did Maystone arrive at the conclusion that his life had proved a hopeless failure. He had lost none of his old ardent sympathy for the poor and suffering. But he felt that he had done even less for his fellow-men than would have been possible if he had lived his life on conventional lines.

'Oh, don't talk to me of the Crystal Palace,' said the talkative man contemptuously. ''Ampstead's the place for me when I want to spend an 'oliday. 'Ampstead 'Eath on a sunny day, with the missus and the kids all around you, and you lies on your belly on the grass and wishes you was a bloomin' moke, with nothing to do but just eat it—or an 'appy kipper a swimmin' about in one of them ponds. *That's* what I call enjoyment, that is.'

The chorus assented in subdued tones, touched by the poetry of the description. Maystone thought sadly of the smiling country which he had not seen for so long. Three years of narrow streets and smoke-veiled skies had dulled his mind, but the old aching love of light and colour and open spaces throbbed in his heart from time to time. The worst trial of his present life was its grey, squalid ugliness, its lack of all refining influences. Sometimes, when beautiful, delicate women drove past him in the street, he

realised with a sudden pang how much he had lost. And to feel that the loss had been pure waste was hard.

After all, it had not been entirely waste. He had felt and suffered and learned. His soul had grown. He had lived.

But he was sick and tired of his condition. He had begun to feel a fierce desire to go back into the world he had left. Nothing but his own pride stood in the way. He might go to his father now if he liked, and promise truthfully to do nothing more towards spreading Socialism. But he felt that he could not do this. If he had any hope of tolerance and sympathy, if there were a likelihood of his father refraining from triumphing over him, he would have gone. But in the long months of suffering and want and bitter brooding, his mind had become warped towards his father. He had come to believe that Colonel Maystone was cold and hard and unfeeling; that he had always regarded his son as an encumbrance, had been glad to get rid of him, and would receive him back with reluctance. It was impossible to return thus.

Yet his heart cried to the old man. He loved his father more deeply than he knew. The bitter hunger for his affection was stronger than the resentment against what Maystone believed to be harshness and injustice. It was only the nervous shrinking from a possible rebuff which kept him from appealing for the closing of their unnatural separation.

For the present he was in better circumstances than he had been for a long time. He had just passed through a period of several months in which he had literally been on the brink of starvation. In various odd ways he had scraped together enough money to provide him with a miserable lodging and to gain a sufficiency of food to keep the breath in his body. Now he had at last obtained a

situation as clerk to a small insurance and general agent in the neighbourhood, for which he was to receive a pound a week. It seemed positive affluence.

His employer was a bilious, surly man, difficult to please. But in the flush of newly revived hope, Maystone had no fear of failing to satisfy him.

The chief cause for alarm was the state of his health. The privation, the gloom, the sickening anxiety of the last few months, had told upon him severely. He had fretted hopelessly when idle, and had overworked his ill-fed body with furious impatience at all sorts of impossible tasks. Like all educated men in distress, he had conceived the idea of earning something with his pen. He had little natural facility in writing, and many laborious and exhausting hours had been passed without proper food or sleep while he had toiled at essays and articles which seemed tedious even to himself, and were inevitably rejected by the periodicals to which he offered them.

Now that this time was over, he was beginning to feel its full effects. He was nervous and excitable, subject to great fits of depression. His digestion was bad, and his appetite impaired. His general health seemed entirely deranged, and he had an almost incessant headache, which left him dull and listless. It sometimes had the effect of making his brain incapable of acting properly. He had been at his new post rather more than a week; and though his labours chiefly consisted in waiting to interview his employer's clients while that gentleman was gossiping and drinking with others outside, and there was little real work to do beyond some mechanical letter-writing and elementary accounts, he had on several occasions found it difficult to accomplish his duties intelligently. He sometimes feared that he was going to break down altogether. But

he felt too hopeless and apathetic to be much disturbed even by such a fear.

The talkative man called the attention of the company to the open door leading into the bar.

'Oh, I say, that's a nice little bit, ain't it?' he remarked, in a slightly lowered voice.

Maystone glanced in the direction indicated, and perceived a very pretty and neatly dressed girl who had just entered. He recognised her at once as a girl who lived over a small shabby shop in the street, kept by a drunken old woman, of whom he had made sundry small purchases. The girl was a dressmaker, though the gossip of the street asserted that she occasionally supplemented the gains of this profession by the earnings of a less reputable calling. It was certainly a fact that she was employed by a firm of some standing, and Maystone happened to know that she was a skilful worker. But from her demeanour there was some ground for supposing that the scandal attached to her was not altogether without foundation. Maystone had met her once or twice in the shop, and had conversed with her. She had shown a considerable desire to captivate him, though her bearing towards him had hardly passed beyond the standard of modesty fixed by the not very elevated taste of the neighbourhood. Even if he had been inclined for such a thing, his miserable pecuniary condition made it unlikely that she would give him any proof of the accuracy of the reports concerning her. But romance, however sordid, had never suggested itself to him as a possibility in his present state. And further, the image of Gladys was still so strong in his memory, that no other woman had the power to attract any side of his nature beyond a passing thought.

But something about this girl had appealed to him, some fancied resemblance in tone or gesture or colouring



perhaps. She had shown a mood of friendliness towards him, and that also had its effect on his lonely, embittered spirit. To-night he felt as if a chat with her would cheer him a little; and he was just preparing to rise from his seat and go to her in the bar, when the street door swung back, and she was joined by a man, who greeted her with familiarity.

Nellie Ruster received the new-comer complacently, and was apparently disposed to take something to drink at his expense, as after a word with her he issued some orders across the bar.

Miss Ruster turned round and calmly scrutinised the occupants of the parlour. She recognised Maystone, and greeted him with a friendly nod and smile. He was returning the salutation when the man in the bar turned also and glanced at him. With a slight sense of annoyance, Maystone perceived that it was Dick Rennett.

He had not seen Rennett for more than a year, and noticed that the hollowness of his cheeks and the general appearance of ill-health had considerably increased. The glitter in his eyes, as they glared from under his overhanging brows, seemed intensified. His appearance accorded well with the bitter and virulent style of oratory which was beginning to make him a well-known man amongst certain classes of the inhabitants of London. He was achieving celebrity of a kind, and portraits and biographies of him had appeared in one or two evening newspapers. He cast a glance of contemptuous dislike at Maystone, and then turned to the girl with some remark which caused her to laugh mischievously and turn another smiling look towards the parlour. Rennett showed signs of impatience and anger, and after what appeared to be a somewhat heated discussion they emptied their glasses and left the bar together.

As the door swung back behind them, Maystone felt an

impulse to rise and follow them. In his present overwrought, irritable condition, he had been stung by the insolence of Rennett's glance. The girl had evidently shown a disposition to annoy the Socialist by coquetting with the object of his dislike, and Maystone was feeling so bitter and morose that he was half disposed to follow them and add to Rennett's annoyance. But the wish passed away almost immediately. He felt too listless and unwell to be able to sustain a very vivid interest in anything or anybody. And, emptying his glass, he debated with himself the expediency of having it replenished.

It was a great temptation. Bad as the liquor was, it would drug his senses and dull his thoughts. Already he was feeling the first faint symptoms of mental haziness. He had little money to spend, and could not afford the few pence required for the refilling of the glass. But a present relief would set off some future inconvenience.

The night before, under the influence of the same feelings, he had become distinctly intoxicated. He had staggered home to his lodging in a condition which had alarmed and horrified the worthy widow in whose house his room was situated. She had always looked on him as a steady man, and was dismayed by this new revelation. He felt that he was on the edge of a downward path, and that the good opinion of the few people who still respected him, as superior to his surroundings, combined with every other prudential consideration to make it advisable to repress the desire. But the desire was very strong, and he played undecidedly with his glass.

A belated piano-organ suddenly struck up outside the public-house. At the first notes of the tune, Maystone relaxed his hold of the glass and sat still, listening. It was playing the waltz-tune to which he had danced with Gladys at Bloomshire House.

A flood of mournful, tender feeling swept the bitterness from his mind. He seemed to be looking back over a wide gulf at the never-forgotten dream of happiness which had made the one bright place in his existence. Beaten and broken as he was, the remembrance of her had still stood between him and absolute surrender to circumstances. His position was almost hopeless now, but there was one step lower—the step to habitual drunkenness and degradation and decay.

It seemed rather absurd, under the circumstances, that so absolutely unreal a dream should influence his conduct now. After all, his fate was decided, and a shade or two more of degradation would make little difference. Yet he felt that he would still like to make one sacrifice to the ideal before finally giving up his arms to the material. He rose from his seat and slipped quietly out of the house.

## CHAPTER II

### A DISTRESSED DAMSEL

HE walked through various streets, hardly noticing the direction he took, and finally found himself on the Thames Embankment. It was almost deserted. He sank upon a seat and gazed at the darkened river.

It was about the middle of October, and the air was unusually warm for the time of year. The leaves still drooped on the branches over his head, though, even in the lamplight, they looked withered and brown. It had been a late autumn.

Before him glided the silent flood. He could only tell that it was moving by the quiver that shook the reflection of long rows of gleaming lamps. These lighted up the surface of the water near at hand, but further out all was darkness, except in one or two places where a light shone yellow on an anchored barge. From time to time a steamer crept up the river—an indistinct, lengthy mass, with coloured lights glowing like some strange creature's eyes; or a barge came drifting down, worked by men with long sweeps, whose motion, as they bent to the slow stroke, was barely discernible in the gloom. Lights gleamed in an arch across the river, where the bridges spanned it. On the other side, the trees in Battersea Park made a dark, irregular pattern against the sky. The sounds of the city seemed very far away, except for the snorting of the

steamboats and the shrill whistle of the trains as they clattered and puffed along the various railways around.

A passing steamer had set the water undulating in great heaving lines, and he could hear it lapping against the stones, full of mysterious voices. He lay back in the seat, with parted lips, rapt in a strange trance.

The sound of voices called him back to earth, and he perceived a man and a woman slowly advancing along the pavement towards him, engrossed in a vehement discussion. They halted a few paces off, and he recognised Nellie Ruster and Dick Rennett. They did not see him, but continued what was apparently a heated argument. Rennett was evidently much excited. He seized the girl by the arm and shook it violently, finally flinging her roughly against the stone parapet and striding off into the darkness, before Maystone, who had sprung to his feet, had time to interfere. The girl came slowly towards him, sobbing bitterly.

'What's the matter?' Maystone asked; 'what are you quarrelling with Rennett about?'

She started at the sound of his voice, and looked up at him with a defiant gaze, which softened when she saw who was addressing her. She sank upon the seat, and her sobs became less violent.

'I hate him!' she exclaimed, with some additional expressions which were scarcely ladylike. 'Why can't he leave me alone?'

Maystone sat down on the seat beside her.

'What is the trouble?' he asked; 'what does he want with you? I believe he is mad.'

'He don't think much better of you,' she said, a smile breaking through her tears; 'if you had heard what he said of you in the public, you'd have paid him pretty quick;—and I wish you had—the beast!'

'Why do you go about with him if you dislike him so much?' Maystone asked.

'Because I'm afraid of him. He's awful when he's angry. I thought he was going to kill me just now.'

'He'd better have tried,' said Maystone, feeling like a knight-errant.

Nellie glanced at him under her eyelashes with another smile. She was certainly a pretty girl, of the plebeian type, dark and pale, with a clear, colourless skin, and good-humoured, childish face. She was an attractive animal, with dim suggestions of a little cockney soul hidden away somewhere.

'You won't let him hurt me, will you?' she asked in a caressing tone, moving closer to him and leaning her head lightly against his shoulder.

'If he troubles you, tell me. I shall know what to do with him. But what is it all about?'

'He wants me to go back and live with him. I did live with him once, but I won't have anything more to do with him.'

'Did he treat you badly?'

'Oh, he was right enough at first. He's not bad when he's in a good temper and things are going all right. I don't say he wasn't very kind to me once. But he can't expect that to make up for everything else, and I'm sure I've paid him back.'

'How?'

'Why, I kept him for two months when he was ill and out of work. And I've kept him again at other times. It was to help him I went on the streets. But I can't stand that knocking-about life, and I won't do it again. I know I should have to if I took up with him. He's always out of work, and he's always getting ill, and then if I don't make him comfortable he treats me shameful. He don't knock

me about much—that ain't Dick's way; but he frightens me, and tells me he'll kill me, when he's in a rage, and I'm always afraid he'll do it some day.'

'But does he know how you got money for him?' asked Maystone. After his experience of the last three years, it was difficult to surprise him, but he was horrified at the matter-of-fact narration.

'Oh, he don't trouble to think about that. He's always taken up with them books of his and with all the speeches he's going to make. He has often told me that women will have a better time when him and his pals get their way, but he don't seem to think much of them, all the same, or he'd care more what became of them. He ain't bad-hearted, you know, but he just thinks that he's very important, and that what he wants to do has got to come first.'

'But surely he must know when you—when you do what you say you did.'

'No, I don't think he ever knowed that. At least, he never took no notice. I used to go to work, and perhaps he thought I got the money there; but I'd have had a pretty bad time if the money hadn't come, I can tell you.'

Maystone could not believe this.

'He *must* have known,' he said.

'I don't think he did. You don't know how little attention he pays when he's thinking of his speeches. But I suppose he thinks you can get money for nothing, for he expects me to get it somehow when he's ill, and I've had enough of it. I'm not going back to him. Besides, I hate the sight of him now.'

'Why?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she answered vaguely. Then she looked at him curiously.

'What has brought you to this?' she suddenly asked.

'To what?'

'Why, what makes you so poor and down in your luck? You're a gentleman.'

Maystone laughed with a touch of bitterness.

'I don't think you would find any one else to agree with you there,' he said.

'Do you think I don't know a gentleman?' she asked.

'I suppose you've got into trouble with your people. What was it about—a girl?'

'No, it wasn't a girl,' he said shortly.

'I expect it was,' she answered—'a lady, likely enough. I wish I was a lady.'

'Why do you wish that?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she repeated, in the same meditative way. Then she sat silent and gazed at the river, her head still resting against his shoulder. After a minute she sat upright and drew a little further away. She seemed to be thinking very seriously about something.

Maystone sat at the end of the seat and watched her. The weary, listless feeling was growing stronger upon him, and he felt disinclined to move or to think things out very carefully. It was easier to be quiet, and watch her pretty face, and vaguely realise that she was friendly and bright, and that her cheek had seemed rather warm and soft against his shoulder. He could not feel very keenly interested in anything, but it was certainly rather pleasant than otherwise to have her near him. Moreover, there was something touching and pathetic about her. He felt as if he were protecting her against vague troubles.

They were both waifs and outcasts. The ordinary respectable, well-regulated world was hedged off from them. They were fellow-soldiers in the Legion of the Lost.

For the moment he forgot his failures and disappointment, and the desire to return to his old condition grew faint. He was not banished from human hearts.



Nellie turned and looked at him with something more nearly approaching shyness in her face than he had ever seen there. Her usual expression of rather impudent good-humour had disappeared.

'I don't believe you'd treat a woman badly,' she said.

'I hope I shouldn't,' he answered, 'but I don't see how you can tell.'

'I think you're awfully good and kind,' she replied, looking at him in the same half-timid way. He smiled and made no answer, rather surprised at the turn her conversation had taken.

'I hope you ain't awfully put out with me,' she said.

'Why on earth should I be?'

'You make me feel somehow as if I'd been too forward with you,' she said; 'you ain't like any other man I've ever known. I knows how to manage *them* easy enough—but you're different.'

'I don't expect I am.'

'Oh yes, you are. I don't know what it is—but you're different.'

She sighed and looked at him like a questioning child. Then she laid her hand on his arm, almost with timidity.

'I'm going now,' she said; 'don't walk with me, because I'm afraid Dick might see, and I don't know what he mightn't do, he's in such a queer mood to-night. I shouldn't like you to get hurt.'

'I don't expect he is about now.'

'I wouldn't risk it. But another time, when there ain't any fear of his coming——' she stopped. Then she went on in a tone which surprised him by its pleading seriousness: 'I shall see you again soon? You won't go away or anything, will you? I know I'm not good enough for the likes of you—and I haven't got much of a place for you to come to—but you *will* come, won't you?'

Maystone's tired head was throbbing, and he listened to her as if in a dream.

'I'll see you again very soon,' he said.

She crept nearer to him.

'Of course it isn't likely you'd take up with such as me,' she said in a low voice, 'but I'd do anything for you. You needn't work, for I'm earning money, and I'd do all I could that you should be comfortable. But, of course, you wouldn't have nothing to do with me;—only I do want you, awful bad!'

She put her face up in the same hesitating way and kissed him, with her arm round his neck. Then she slipped off the seat and hurried away into the darkness.

Maystone sat on for some little time, feeling too languid to move. He had hardly grasped the meaning of all that she had said, and he could not rouse himself sufficiently to think over her remarks. But he felt as if he were being gently carried along, like the river that flowed before him. Something fresh had come into his life, and would cling to him whether he wished it or not. The hand of Fate was at work, and he could only wait for it to disclose what it held.

The slightly damaged Una having now disappeared, the Red Cross Knight rose with an effort and dragged his weary feet homewards.

## CHAPTER III

### COLLAPSE

NEXT morning Maystone felt so ill that it was with difficulty that he got up and went to his work. He left his coarse breakfast untouched. Through the night he had lain awake, tossing about in feverish discomfort, with burning hands and a head that ached as if it were being screwed down in a vice.

His landlady, Mrs. Barrett, watched him depart with a look of concern. She was a bright-eyed, bustling little woman, who kept herself and an invalid daughter in a state of neatness and respectability on her small earnings as a charwoman and her lodger's rent, supplemented by some help from an absent son.

'I'm afraid that young man had a drop too much again last night, Sarah Jane,' she said; 'I'm disappointed in him. He seemed so very respectable and civil-spoken. He has paid his rent for the week in advance, but I'm in two minds about giving him notice to go at the end of it. There's that gentleman from the butcher's shop as would take his place gladly.'

'There's nice juicy bits trimmed off the joints he might be able to get for us,' remarked Sarah Jane pensively.

I'll go over and see him about it this very day,' said Mrs. Barrett with decision. She was not easy in her mind about Maystone. He had been with her a week, his last

lodging having been a dirty cupboard of a room in a dingy street close by. As he had only been able to get a few things out of pawn, his luggage was sufficiently scanty to cause her some misgiving. The small weekly sum that he paid for board and lodging was strictly demanded in advance.

Meanwhile Maystone had arrived at the little office which took up most of the ground floor of the house inhabited by his employer, Mr. Shadd. He was late, and that person was awaiting him with some impatience. Mr. Shadd was a podgy, bilious-looking man, with a yellow face and a red nose. He was not a drunkard, but he always did business 'over a glass,' and the glass was gradually doing its business over him.

'Look 'ere,' he said, 'this won't do for me. If you can't come in time, you'll very soon 'ave to leave off coming at all. I've got an appointment in 'Ammersmith at 'alf past ten, and I want to set you to work before I go. What do you mean by it?'

'I am very sorry,' Maystone answered; 'I am not very well to-day.'

'That isn't no excuse. You've *got* to be well enough to do my work, or I'll find some one else to do it. You look as if you'd 'ad a drop too much last night. Don't play these games on me. Now look 'ere, I want you to write to Maddon about this loan. If the fool thinks 'e can get it on such security as that, 'e's mistaken, and you've got to tell 'im so. And then, I want all these circulars sent out. They've got to be done to-day, and when I come back this evening I shall expect to find them finished. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' Maystone answered meekly, and went to his desk with an aching heart to counterbalance his throbbing head, while Mr. Shadd walked heavily out of the room.

He looked helplessly at the circulars. They would have given him a big job under any circumstances, but to-day he felt as if they were beyond him altogether. He was too listless and ill to rebel, but a black sense of misery seemed to take hold of him.

With infinite labour he composed the letter to the over-expectant Maddon, copied it, and took it out to the post. The fresh air revived him a little, and he returned to fold and address the pile of circulars with stronger resolution. It was dull, monotonous work, but fortunately it required little thought, and he proceeded with it almost mechanically, though the addresses in the Directory seemed sadly illegible to his burning eyes.

He worked on for some hours. His mind was scarcely capable of thought, but vague suggestions seemed to be floating through it, like figures in a dream. Nellie Ruster was the centre of these dim shapes. She was the first human being who had shown a sign of affection towards him, or to whom he had been in any sense drawn for a long time. He must see her again. The thought of her seemed to rest his tired faculties and soothe his throbbing nerves. His mind moved on to the remembrance of Gladys. She seemed to look at him out of another life, a beautiful, tender memory. She belonged to a hopelessly ended past, and he was looking for something to calm his agony in the present. Nellie appeared to offer him a little of the needful, priceless gift of sympathy and love—a gleam of sunshine in the fog.

With his serious, responsible way of looking at things, he did not contemplate the possibility of a mere temporary *liaison* with her. If he went to her, it would be with the fixed idea of a permanent connection. Indeed, he felt, with a faint glow of his early enthusiasm, that to link his life with this poor little outcast, to treat her as an equal and a comrade, would be a final sacrifice, a concluding

acceptance of the bond of brotherhood with the despised of this world. He would try to carry the light of unselfish love into the dark places of the earth.

Whether this was sophistry, self-deception, or simple idiocy, casuists may determine.

As the day advanced, he grew fainter and more confused. He felt no desire to eat, and continued to toil on without food; but gradually a numbing drowsiness crept over him, and finally his head sank upon his desk, and he remained in a condition of broken slumber, disturbed by hideous dreams.

He was roused by the return of Mr. Shadd. To his surprise, he found it was six o'clock. The office was in darkness. As he was trying with feeble hands to light the gas, his employer entered.

'What's the meaning of this?' asked Mr. Shadd irritably. He looked cross and morose; and, from the spirituous odour which hung about him, he had clearly been drinking. 'You can't have done any work if you've been sitting in the dark. Why, you 'aven't 'alf finished them circulars! Well, you don't go till they're done, I can tell you that!'

Maystone hardly knew what he was saying or doing.

'Damn your circulars!' he answered with a foolish laugh; 'I'm going now.'

Mr. Shadd stared at him for a moment. Then he put his hand in his pocket.

'I see you've been drinking again,' he said; 'ere's your money to the end of the week. You needn't come back any more. I don't want your sort. Clear out—sharp!'

Maystone mechanically took the money and tottered out into the street. He scarcely realised what he was doing, but he made his way homewards, staggering a little as he walked. The passers-by indorsed Mr. Shadd's opinion of his condition.

Mrs. Barrett was awaiting his return with some trepidation. She had found the butcher's young man ready to come as her lodger if she could take him at once. But he was in treaty with another lady for the bestowal of his person, and he did not feel disposed to wait for Maystone to go. Mrs. Barrett was a woman of decision, and she made up her mind that Maystone must go at once. Sarah Jane made a feeble remonstrance, as it would entail the return to him of the rent which he had paid in advance that morning, but Mrs. Barrett felt that a future good was worth a slight temporary inconvenience. She had accordingly closed with the butcher, and had already transferred his possessions to the room. Maystone's few things she had tied up in a bundle to give him on his return.

Her conscience reproached her slightly. But people who spend their lives on the brink of destitution can hardly be expected to show that self-effacing regard for the welfare of others which might be desired. She was sorry to turn him out, but she had to think of herself and her daughter first.

When he staggered into the house, she also fell into the error of supposing him to be the worse for drink. The room was dark, and she could not see his face clearly.

'I'm sorry to inconvenience you,' she said rapidly, 'but you can't come back here any more. It's sudden work, I know; but it can't be helped, and here's the money as you've paid, and I haven't kept nothing out of it for necessary cleaning up after you go, as some folks would; and I've done up your things for you, and here they are, and I hope you've been comfortable here, and we parts with good feeling on both sides, but business is business, and everything as I've done in this matter is quite legal and proper, and I hope you're satisfied.'

Maystone put the money into his pocket, and took the

bundle. Then he turned silently and stumbled out into the street without a word. Mrs. Barrett, who was gradually recovering her breath after her flow of explanation, was somewhat aggrieved by his silence. However, she felt that her conduct was vindicated, and expressed her relief at the change of lodgers to Sarah Jane in copious terms. Sarah Jane rocked herself before the fire, and dreamed of bullock's liver and other luxuries. A life of monotonous suffering left her without much interest in practical affairs.

Maystone went reeling down the street in a semi-conscious condition. He vaguely realised that he was cast out on all sides, but he was incapable of forming any definite idea as to what his next step should be. His legs seemed weighted with lead, and the grinding pain was fiercer than ever in his throbbing head.

An arm was passed through his, and Nellie Ruster's voice greeted him.

'I thought it was you,' she said, with a delighted smile; 'where are you going?'

'I don't know,' he answered feebly.

She dragged him into the light of a lamp, gazing into his face with horrified eyes.

'My God!' she exclaimed, 'what's the matter with you? Are you ill? You look awful bad.'

'I think I am dying,' he murmured incoherently.

'Not you,' she answered, in an encouraging tone; 'you come along with me. You oughtn't to be out in the street in this state. Here, give me your bundle. Now, take my arm—that's right. Come along.'

She led him down the street, with a look on her face half anxious, half triumphant. He walked beside her in a dream. He vaguely realised that they entered the shop over which she lived, and that Mrs. Budge, who kept it, helped Nellie to get him upstairs. He missed the point



of the unlovely jests with which Mrs. Budge had welcomed Nellie's arrival in such company.

After that things grew more confused. He was conscious of lying on a bed, of people moving about and entering and leaving the room. Some one, possibly Nellie, helped him to take off his clothes, and tucked him up in bed, leaning over to kiss him as his head sank on the pillow.

After that, life became a hideous nightmare, full of strange events and terrible people, and lasted for centuries.

## CHAPTER IV

### COMING BACK TO LIFE

AFTER what seemed like measureless ages, the horrible nightmare gradually faded from Maystone's mind. He had brief periods of consciousness, in which he only realised a sensation of lassitude and weakness, and a weary hope that death would come soon and end his agonies. But the fever returned, and fresh horrors beset him ; till at last he woke one day to find himself calm and sane, helplessly weak, but finally rid of the nameless terror and burning pain which had oppressed him so long.

He moved slightly, and tried to speak, but his voice seemed to have departed. In an instant, however, Nellie was at his side, holding a delicious draught to his lips. In every brief pause in his delirium he had been conscious of her quiet, soothing presence, and had felt her cool hand upon his burning skin. He thanked her now with his eyes. She smiled back a response, and seemed to speak, though he was scarcely able to comprehend her words. Then, with a grateful sigh, he sank back and fell asleep again, his last sensation being to feel her lips on his forehead.

Several more days passed. He slept much, but woke each time refreshed and strengthened. Always he found the same silent figure in the room, sometimes sitting at work, sometimes bending over him with tender solicitude. He gradually became able to converse a little, though his

brain could scarcely grasp anything more than his immediate wants. But the exhaustion of the fever was speedily passing away, and he awoke one morning to find himself able to talk and eat, with a new fervent longing for life in his heart.

Nellie came and fed him like a baby. For the first time he was able to notice her appearance. She was pale, dishevelled, and untidy, with dark rings round her hollow eyes, but she smiled at him with the same loving look of tenderness, and talked in soft, cheerful tones. Presently a strange man arrived, whom he discovered to be a doctor. He felt Maystone's pulse, smiled encouragingly, told him that he was rapidly getting better, and eventually left the room with Nellie.

Maystone lay still, gazing round the room, and trying to thread together the broken chain of his ideas. The room was poorly furnished, but it was neat and tidy. Nellie's sewing-machine stood by the window. A mattress in a further corner was evidently her resting-place. There was no carpet on the floor, but a tattered rug lay beside the bed. On a cane-bottomed chair close by lay the skirt of a dress, evidently in course of completion. A rickety chest of drawers, surmounted by a dilapidated looking-glass, and a washing-stand, fitted with an incongruous assortment of crockery, seemed to complete the furniture of the room. The wall-paper was faded and discoloured, and just over the bed a dead spider was sticking to it, flattened out in a brown blot. Maystone had noticed this spider before, and during his long spells of drowsy lassitude he had lain and watched it with a sort of fascination. The wall-paper had been to him a landscape, on which this was the solitary landmark.

His eye fell on a small deal table in another corner, which he had not previously noticed. On it was a collec-

tion of medicine bottles, and also, to his surprise, an expensive-looking cooking-stove, and one or two other sickroom appliances, such as he would have thought to be beyond Nellie's means. This struck him as rather curious, but he felt too listless to speculate much on the subject.

Presently Nellie returned. She smiled at him, and came over to his bedside, where she arranged the pillow and smoothed out the sheet, after which she kissed him again. She sat down on the chair close by, took up the skirt, and began to sew.

'The doctor says I may talk to you now,' she said; 'he says you're out of all danger, and that as long as you don't get overtired you'll get along all right.'

'How long have I been here?' he asked.

'Oh, a long time. I forget exactly, but it's days and days.'

'And you have nursed me all the time,' he said, more to himself than to her. Her eyes brightened with pleasure as she noticed the fervent gratitude in his tone.

'Oh, that's nothing,' she said. 'I'd do much more than that for you. They wanted to take you to the 'Orspital, but I wouldn't let them. I'd got you, and I meant to keep you,' she added, with a look of triumphant tenderness.

Maystone made no reply. He had a curious sensation of mingled humility and gratitude and surprise. What had he done to deserve this? He had seen so little of her before his illness, and she owed him nothing. And yet she was freely giving him a wealth of self-sacrificing love without thought of any recompense or gain. He was prostrated in reverential awe before this great and beautiful mystery—the working of a woman's heart.

'I'm afraid you're awfully knocked up,' he said; 'you must have had a terrible time.'

'Lor' bless you, I don't mind,' she answered; 'I've got

along all right. It was rather bad the first few days, because the money began to run short; and after I had spent what I found in your pockets, I was rather pushed to know what to do next. Old Mrs. Budge was real good, considering she hasn't got too much for herself. She came and helped me a lot, and cooked things, and was awful kind.'

'But how did you manage about money?' asked Maystone, a horrible suspicion crossing his mind. 'How have you paid the doctor, and where did you get all those things?'

'Why, the lady did all that, of course. After she came I hadn't no trouble. She fetched up her own doctor—quite a swell medical man he is—and she gave me money and sent grapes and things. Oh, she has been very good to us.'

'But I don't understand,' said Maystone in astonishment. 'Who is the lady? What do you mean?'

'Bless my soul, to think as she's been here a dozen times, and you never knowed about it! You was awful funny when she was here once or twice. You used to talk such stuff. Once you looked at her and called her a silly old crocodile, and asked her why she didn't leave off rattling her scales in that way. I *did* laugh, for all I was so troubled about you.'

Nellie laughed again at the reminiscence, though her laughter sounded a little hollow.

'Yes, but who is she?' persisted Maystone.

'Oh, ask me another! I can't tell you who she is. I expect she's one of those Bible-women, or female curates, or whatever they are, that comes messing about. I didn't want her at first, I can tell you. I was cross and tired the first time she came, and I was pretty short with her. But she wouldn't take no offence, but just smiled quite gentle at me, and said I looked tired, and she'd send me some

port wine ; and she went on so, that at last I cried, and she was as kind as she could be—and oh, you should just see the cut of her jackets ! She's always dressed quite plain and simple, in black, but her clothes don't come from a reach-me-down place, *I* can tell you.'

Maystone began to feel interested.

'Is she coming again ?' he asked.

'Oh yes, she said she'd come as soon as she got back to London. But she was going away for a few days. But the doctor has come just the same, and her servant has been round once or twice to bring things.'

'Do you know her name ?'

'No, I never heard it. But she's a real lady, there's no mistake about that. They say as she often comes to the street, and she's been doing things for Mrs. Barrett's sick daughter and other folk. She's so curious, for she don't seem to mind nothing. Mrs. Budge was awful drunk once or twice when she came, and she didn't care at all, but only seemed sorry for her. And when that old cat of a Mrs. Riddle, over the way, came in one day and told her what *I* was, and warned her against having anything to do with me, she just said, "Oh, we're none of us saints in this world," and sent the old beast off, and told her not to come over here disturbing the patient. I think she's just that good that no one and nothing seems bad to her.'

Nellie had not had many opportunities of studying goodness during her life, and it interested her.

Maystone lay still and gazed at the dead spider. His curiosity was slightly roused, and he began to wish that he might soon have a chance of seeing the mysterious stranger.

Thus the day wore on. Nellie scarcely left the room, but sewed industriously, or moved about preparing food and tidying the furniture. Outside it seemed to be a soft, sunny autumn day, and pale streaks of sunlight filtered in

through the dirty window, making patterns on the floor. Maystone talked little; but in spite of his weakness, he felt interested in life, and observant of all that passed. Nellie chattered on in a careless way. Silence was the greatest of all efforts to her, and he began to realise still more the strain she must have undergone in the long watches of his illness.

Her mind was naturally a sunny one. She took a cheerful, rather reckless view of life, with little looking before or after, and seemed to see most things through the veil of humour which seldom deserts a Londoner. She gossiped inconsequently about her neighbours, her pursuits, and her enjoyments, and talked with irresponsible frankness of the experiences of her past life. Everything appeared to make so light an impression on her, that her devotion to Maystone was the more incomprehensible.

'Have you heard anything of Dick Rennett?' he asked suddenly.

'Oh, he's in gaol,' she answered carelessly.

'In gaol!'

'Yes; so they tell me. There was a shindy at some meeting, and the police interfered, and Dick punched a copper on the jaw, or something of the sort, and now he's in quod. I don't care how long he stays there.'

'I daresay he won't trouble you any more, wherever he is,' Maystone remarked.

'I don't know about that,' she said, 'he's so silly. Why, I've lived with other men much longer than I did with him, and they never think they have any claim on me. But, of course, he's awfully gone on me, though he do show it so queerly.'

There was an artless simplicity about her views of life which almost amounted to innocence.

The day passed, the night succeeded it, and another

morning arrived, bringing to Maystone increased vigour. He began to feel anxious about Nellie's health as he looked at her pale, worn face.

'You mustn't stay in with me all day now,' he said; 'I'm so much better, you can quite well leave me, and you ought to go out and get some fresh air and amuse yourself a little. You'll be ill if you stay with me so much.'

She came and knelt beside the bed, and put her arms round his neck.

'Do you think I mind being ill so long as I can stay with you?' she said. 'Darling, I never felt about any man as I do about you. I know it's ridiculous. I'm only a poor girl, and you're a gentleman, and you'll go away and leave me, but I'll keep you as long as I can.'

He took her hands between his.

'I will never leave you, Nellie,' he said; 'I owe you my life, and I will pay the debt.'

'Do you really mean that?' she asked, her face lighting up with eager hope.

'Most truly do I mean it,' he said.

She shook her head, gazing at him with mournful, hungry eyes.

'You mean it now, while you're lying there,' she answered, 'but it will be different later on. You're awfully good, and you mean fair enough, but it ain't natural. You could never take up with the likes of me. You'll go back to your own people, and forget all about me.'

'I have no one to go back to,' he replied. She looked at him with the same incredulous sadness.

'I shall go and jump into the river when you go,' she said. 'But you *will* go. I know that, whatever you may say.'

He tried to reassure her, but scarcely succeeded. She buried her face in his breast, and sobbed passionately, while



he did what he could to soothe and comfort her. But she seemed haunted by some fatalistic foreboding.

‘Who is Gladys?’ she asked suddenly.

‘Gladys? What do you mean?’ A faint flush passed over his face as he put the question. She looked at him with a sad smile.

‘You know what I mean,’ she said. ‘You was always talking about her when you was out of your mind. Many a time I sat and listened for hours while you went on about her, and asked her to come back to you, and said she was the only one you cared for, and the only one who could help you. Oh, I remember it all, every word! I could tell you everything you said about her.’

‘I was delirious and imagined things,’ he said. ‘I had a friend called Gladys once, but she was never more than a friend, and never could be. I have not seen her for years, and I shall never see her again.’

‘Oh, it’s no good telling me that,’ she exclaimed with a heavy sigh; ‘you’ll go back to where you came from. Do you think I didn’t know that when I sat by you in the dark and heard you calling to her? I was there, doing anything I could for you, but you wanted her all the time. Gladys! Gladys!—it was always Gladys!’

He tried to reason with her, but it was in vain.

‘What could I do for you to make you care for me?’ she exclaimed passionately. ‘There ain’t nothing you could ask as would be too much for me to give. But it’s all no use. You’ll go back to them you belongs to, and you’ll never stay with me.’

To divert her attention, he questioned her about the unknown lady who had visited them, but he could not change the current of her thoughts.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘of course you want to see her. She’s one of your own sort, and you’ll find her different to me.

But I'll keep you as long as I can. They shan't get you away from me easy. You're mine now, dear, and that's enough for me. When it ends, I shall end myself too.'

Maystone was growing tired, and was much distressed by this conversation. She suddenly noticed the effect it was having on him, and was seized with remorse.

'There,' she said, with an effort to smile, 'you mustn't mind the nonsense I talk. I've got the hump to-day, and it don't mean nothing.'

She kissed him again, with a lingering fervour that belied the lightness of her words. Then she resumed her occupations, and chattered and bustled about as gaily as ever. He began to hope that the mood had been superficial and fleeting.

The day wore on much as before. The noises of the city echoed faintly from the street, and the sunshine filtered into the room. Nellie worked and talked, and kept him lazily amused. At times she was silent, and he lay and watched the brown spider on the dirty expanse of wall-paper.

Other similar days followed. But one afternoon a strange voice sounded below, apparently addressing Mrs. Budge. Nellie rose with a smile and moved towards the doorway. Maystone started violently. The colour rushed to his cheeks, and his breath came in short gusts. He listened eagerly, with his eyes fixed on the door.

It opened, and Gladys Presterley came into the room.

## CHAPTER V

### THE PRICE OF BEING DON QUIXOTE

MAYSTONE lay still and stared at her with wide-stretched eyes. He was trembling all over, and his heart beat like a steam-hammer. The three intervening years were for a moment swept from his remembrance. The old buried time came back into vivid life. He doubted the reality of the vision.

She was scarcely changed at all, as far as he could see. The same delicate, pale skin, the same straggling fair hair, the same graceful form. Her eyes were more grave and thoughtful than of old, but her eyebrows still arched in their quaint, questioning way, and her red mouth still curled with the old humorous expression. She was dressed entirely in black; but her appearance belonged so completely to the world from which he had banished himself, that the mean surroundings of the room took a new aspect for him. A wild tumult of revolt against his lot rose in his heart, and left him pale and shaken when he had crushed it down.

The next idea which seized him was a ridiculous consciousness that he was unshaven and unwashed, and that a bristling crop of dark stubble sprouted on his lips and chin. He glanced at the dingy sheets on his bed, and wished vaguely that his environment had been more pleasing. She must be disgusted by it.

There were no traces of disgust in the kindly smile with which she greeted Nellie.

'Well,' she said, 'how is he going on?'

'Oh, famous!' Nellie replied with an answering smile. She was evidently completely at her ease with Gladys. 'Come and talk to him,' she went on; 'he's in his senses now, and he's getting on nicely. I expect he'll be out of bed in a day or two.'

Gladys moved to the bedside, and looked into his face with a mingled expression of humour, commiseration, and friendliness.

'I'm so glad you are getting better,' she said; 'you owe it all to your nurse.'

His lips moved once or twice before he could speak.

'Where have you come from?' he murmured. 'I don't understand. Am I delirious again, or is it really you?'

'It is very much me,' she replied ungrammatically; 'and now that you're able to talk again, instead of behaving like a lunatic, I want to hear and tell you a good deal.'

She drew a chair to his bedside and sat down with a look of satisfaction on her face, holding out her hand to him. He took it and held it, gazing at her with a wistful, helpless expression in his staring eyes. He seemed unable to speak.

Nellie had started violently at his words, and was watching them with parted lips and eyes full of astonishment and concern. Her face was very white.

'Why,' she exclaimed, 'do you know him?'

'Certainly,' Gladys answered; 'we are old acquaintances.' She turned to Nellie with the smile still upon her lips, but it faded away as she caught sight of the girl's face.

'What is the matter, Nellie?' she asked, springing up and moving towards her. 'Are you ill? You have knocked yourself up with nursing him.'

'I'm all right,' said Nellie brusquely, turning away. 'You go and talk to him. I shan't disturb you. I'm going to work.'

She sat down in the furthest corner of the room and began to sew, bending her head over the work and biting her lips. Gladys gazed at her with a puzzled, anxious look. She had no idea of the storm of jealous fear and anguish that was raging in Nellie's breast, though she had some instinctive suspicion of the cause of her change of manner. But she was accustomed to external symptoms of clumsiness and roughness in this untamed daughter of Ishmael, and attached little importance to them. With the comforting reflection that the cloud would speedily pass off, she sat down once more and turned to Maystone.

He had recovered his self-possession, and was able to talk with something approaching to calmness, though there were traces of agitation in his voice and demeanour.

'How long have you been here?' Gladys asked in a low voice.

'Since I was taken ill,' he answered. 'I don't know how long that is. Nellie brought me in here on the last day which I can remember at all distinctly, and I know nothing more.'

'Have you had a very bad time since I saw you last?' she asked.

'I think I have touched the extreme limit of suffering,' he answered quietly. 'But I would rather not talk about it. I have looked into the face of Truth, and I do not wish to complain.'

She did not answer, but her eyes filled with tears, and her lips quivered as she looked at his wasted, haggard face. She had been through a good deal herself. Once she had been inclined to pity herself, to think that her lot had been harder than that of the generality of mankind. But that

thought had grown faint lately, and now it finally died in a deep sense of the insignificance of her own suffering. The change in his face, transfigured by want, and anxiety, and illness, haunted her mind like remorse. Her womanly nature was stirred to its deepest foundations. She could not speak, but the deep, passionate pity in her eyes was as eloquent to him as words.

'You are very good,' he said with a faint smile; 'but tell me about yourself. There are so many things I want to know. How is your husband?'

She brushed the tears from her eyes, and struggled to master her voice.

'He has been dead nearly two years,' she replied. She spoke without any affectation of regret, though there was no trace of harshness in her tone. Maystone felt wild thoughts whirl through his brain at the intelligence, but he thrust them out with a shade of self-contempt.

'And Lady Maria?' he asked.

'She is dead too,' answered Gladys. His sensitive ear recognised the suppressed feeling which had taken the place of the previous indifference.

'I am almost afraid to ask you more,' he said after a pause; 'life seems chiefly to consist of death. Is Charlie Rafford alive?'

'Yes,' she answered shortly. His senses, sharpened by his illness, were awake to every change in her voice, and her response astonished him a little.

'Have you quarrelled with him?' he asked.

She started, and stared at him guiltily.

'Why on earth should you think that?' she asked.

'Your voice seemed to say so. I am sorry if it is the case. Though I have not seen him for so long, and may never see him again, he is more to me than any brother could be. I should not like *you* to dislike him.'

The inflexion of his voice spoke more than the words conveyed. She looked away with a faint colour on her cheeks.

'I do not dislike him,' she said; 'we have drifted apart, but I have many pleasant memories connected with him. The difference between us is not his fault. I do not even think it is mine. Fate plays curious tricks with us all. But I have no thought of him which is not kindly, and I believe he would say the same.'

'How is he? Is he well?'

'I have not seen him for a very long time. I believe he is well now. I heard that he had rather a serious illness last spring, but I fancy he has recovered again. I was told that he had become a candidate for Parliament, and was proving himself a brilliant and powerful speaker, so I conclude that he is all right now.'

'Dear old chap! he is sure to come to the front whatever he does,' Maystone said. Gladys did not reply. Even now it was a pleasure to her to hear Rafford spoken of in this way, though she thought of him almost as of one who had long been dead. The man she had loved *was* dead, so far as she was concerned. If he had walked into the room then, she could not have regarded him in any other light.

They sat silent for more than a minute, both living again in that unforgotten past. It seemed as if they had never been separated; it was so natural to be talking together again. But there was a difference in the feelings of both. Maystone's heart was glowing once more with the old adoration, but its hopelessness was of a different kind. Formerly he had plainly realised the impossibility of gaining any reciprocal feeling from her. Now circumstance and duty seemed to place her so far out of his reach, that he could love her freely, as though she had been a disembodied spirit.

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She also regarded him with different eyes. In old days she had felt only sympathy and friendship. Now she was bowed before him in humble admiration, feeling that he had been through the furnace, and was refined beyond the standard of ordinary human metal.

'Do you know anything of my father?' he asked, with a shake in his voice.

'Not much,' she answered. 'You see, I have never met him. I heard Laura Seathwaite mention him a few months ago, and he was apparently well then.'

She did not think it necessary to tell him that Lady Seathwaite had commented on Colonel Maystone's aged and broken appearance.

They talked for some time longer, much in the old friendly way. It seemed to both as if a long-pent stream of sympathy had been allowed to flow again. Since her break with Rafford, Gladys had not opened her heart so freely to any one. She had sealed it up, bruised and shrinking.

At last she rose to go, and he held her hand with a lingering clasp.

'I will come again soon,' she said. 'I hope you will be out of bed by that time. I must have a comfortable chair sent down for you.'

He thanked her, feeling still that it was nothing but a dream. She turned to Nellie, whose presence they had almost forgotten, and spoke some light word of farewell. Nellie responded with stiff constraint, looking at her with wild, hunted eyes, half savage, half reproachful. Gladys noticed the expression and the manner, and pondered on it as she went away, partially realising its import.

Nellie turned to Maystone impulsively.

'I knew how it would be!' she exclaimed. 'I don't count for nothing now!'



‘How can you say such a thing?’ he asked.

The storm which had been gathering burst out. She spoke no harsh word to him, nothing but expressions of love and despair; nor did she, even in her misery, speak ill of Gladys. But her uncontrolled nature hurried her into a flood of protestations and imprecations against Fate. Her words revealed strange views and suspicions which were natural enough to one whose experience of life had been such as hers. What struck Maystone as most painful was the fact that she could not believe it possible that he or any man would make the smallest sacrifice on her behalf, or regard her from any but a totally selfish point of view—a comment on her experience of men.

Finally she burst into a fit of sobbing, crouched on the floor beside his bed, and clinging to his hand, which she pressed to her heart.

‘Don’t leave me!’ she cried. ‘I can’t do without you!’

Maystone bent towards her. There was no doubt nor struggle in his heart. He had made up his mind that his duty was to her, and the sight of Gladys, the exquisite joy of his talk with her, had not shaken his resolution.

‘I am not going to leave you, Nellie,’ he said softly; ‘I told you so before, and I do not go back from my word.’

‘Oh, you will, you will!’ she sobbed. ‘You belong to them and not to me. Directly she spoke to you, you was different. I can’t talk to you of Lady This and Colonel That. I’m not your sort, and you know it, and you know you’ll soon tire of me and go back to them as suits you. You’re good and kind, but you don’t love me.’

‘I’m very fond of you,’ he said weakly.

‘Do you think I don’t know the difference? Oh, my darling, what shall I do when you are gone?’

‘I will not go,’ he answered. ‘I swear to you that I will be with you through everything. You have given me my

life, and I give it back to you gladly. Don't be silly, Nellie ; I am not going to leave you.'

She looked up at him, smiling doubtfully.

'Do you really mean it?' she asked.

'Really and truly,' he replied, taking her hand in his. Even as he spoke he felt his heart sink. The sight of her face gave him a feeling of dissatisfaction in spite of its beauty. He saw little of what he wanted in her big, childish eyes, her pouting, sensuous mouth. His conscience smote him with shame for the ingratitude of this rebellious impulse, but he could not altogether check it.

She rose to her feet with the grief fading from her expression. Nothing lasted long with her, except this passionate adoration for him. Perhaps that would not last long either. It would very likely fade when it was too late to matter.

She bent over and kissed him on the lips, not noticing, in her momentary gleam of happiness, how cold and unresponsive they were. Then she resumed her work again, singing softly to herself, while he lay still and watched the dead spider on the wall.

## CHAPTER VI

### ANOTHER REVIVAL; AND A COMPLICATION

GLADYS was living in a small set of rooms in Sloane Street. After poor Presterley had been laid in his grave, regretted by scarcely any one, the full extent of his pecuniary entanglement had become known. As he was the last of his family, the question of entail did not affect the solution of the various problems which arose. Rickwood was sold, together with the whole of his landed property, and the lease of the house in Lowndes Square was also disposed of. Gladys found herself with a very moderate income, alone in the world.

A few months after Presterley's death, Lady Maria was summoned to the land of spirits. The shock crushed Gladys for a time, and it was only slightly softened by the unexpected sympathy and kindness which Lady Seathwaite showed to her in her misfortunes. Somewhere in the icy recesses of her bosom Lady Seathwaite carried the bud of a heart. If it had never blossomed, perhaps circumstances were to blame.

The experiences of these years had not altered Gladys very much. She was still impulsive and enthusiastic, oscillating suddenly between enjoyment and dissatisfaction. She still felt that she had asked a question of life which had not been answered, and until some sort of answer came she could not expect peace. She had thought that the vague want had been nothing but the desire for an

absorbing passion. But the absorbing passion had come, had swept over her like a fire, and had left her heart, as she believed, withered and dead ;—but still there was not even the calm of utter hopelessness. She began to perceive that, for a nature such as hers, there was no peace on this side of the grave.

She had never seen Charlie Rafford since the day of her husband's death. He had not written to her, nor come near her, but she had neither wished nor expected him to do so. For months she had been torn by a conflict of emotions, sometimes passionately longing to see him again, sometimes shrinking from the thought of him with shame, anger, and something very like hatred. She felt that she had humiliated herself before him, and the thought stung her pride. At times she acknowledged that the blame had been chiefly on her side, and that, whatever his motives, he had saved her from a disastrous step. But it would be too much to expect of female humanity that her wounded spirit should often be able to do him this justice.

Gradually, however, her mind had calmed down. She looked back on the past with pain, and the thought of it brought the blood to her cheeks. But her spirit grew humbler and less defiant ; she desired to forget her own mistakes, and this compelled her to forget his. She thought of him without resentment, but she felt that the old love was for ever ended. He held the place in her mind of one long dead.

A few days after her conversation with Maystone she started out with the intention of repeating her visit to him. As she walked down Sloane Street the sky was clear, and a pale sun tinged with delicate golden colour the mist which hung transparently before the distant houses. It was a soft, mild day, and the gentle wind soothed her nerves as it fanned her cheek and lightly moved her waving hair. It

seemed to her that life was still very good. Her heart was quiet and lulled. And it scarcely woke to agitation when she suddenly found herself face to face with Rafford on the pavement.

‘How d’ye do?’ she said in a matter-of-fact tone. ‘I have not seen you for a long time.’

He started, and his face flushed. Then he looked at her nervously, and replied to her greeting in a slightly unsteady voice.

She could hardly have believed that two years could make so much difference in him. She had left him a young man, and found him now middle-aged. His hair was quite grey. His face was lined and wrinkled, and there was a tired, oppressed look about his sunken cheeks and hollow eyes. His illness must have tried him a good deal, for it had killed his youth. But the change made matters much easier for her. She felt that the man who had held such a fascination over her was indeed dead. She had loved and hated him, but this man before her could inspire neither love nor hatred. She only felt for him sympathetic pity, tinged with the sadness of memory. It was like talking to a ghost.

‘I am glad I have met you,’ she said. ‘I want you to come with me.’

He looked all the more surprised, and hesitated.

‘Where are you going?’ he asked.

‘Slumming,’ she replied briefly. He smiled, but without the old mockery.

‘How we all change!’ he remarked. ‘So you have taken to good works.’

‘Yes,’ she answered. ‘You know, they are always the refuge of a woman with a damaged reputation.’

He felt the thrust, and looked away. It was natural that she should keep him at arm’s length. He did not com-

plain, though he thought that it was a little hard. If he had been more unscrupulous in the past, she would probably not have hated him so much now. But that was only natural. He knew he had been brutal to her, but it had been with a not altogether base motive. Still, he could not expect her to give him credit for that.

'Do you think I had better come with you?' he asked doubtfully.

'Certainly,' she answered. 'I should not have suggested it if I had not meant it. I am going to see Mr. Maystone.'

'Maystone!' he exclaimed. 'Have you found him?'

'Yes. Now come along quickly, please. I want to catch the 'bus in Sloane Square. You look as if you had not got over your illness yet.'

Her tone was less sympathetic than her feelings, but she could not be natural with him yet, and was keeping behind her fortifications. She might have adopted any tone she liked with him : he was very humble.

'I think I am all right,' he said. 'My lungs are still weak, and I can't quite get rid of my cough. The doctors wanted me to go abroad for the winter, but they are always over careful. I want to stay at present, as we shall probably have an election in the spring, and I am standing for Parliament.'

'So I heard,' she said. 'This is our 'bus.'

They entered the omnibus and travelled down the King's Road. He did not attempt to speak to her again, and she showed no desire for conversation. Presently she stopped the omnibus, and they got out. She led him through a succession of small streets, chiefly in silence, though she occasionally dropped a commonplace remark. She was quite self-possessed, while he felt ill at ease.

They entered a small shop, where a red-faced woman sat

behind the counter. She hastened out to greet Gladys in obsequious fashion, smelling very strongly of gin.

Gladys said, 'Oh, Mrs. Budge! you promised me to give up the drink.'

Mrs. Budge shed tears.

'God bless your kind 'eart, my lady!' she said; 'I've never touched a drop, saving a thimbleful as I took to be sociable with Mrs. Riddle just now.'

Gladys shook her head, looking at her with a grave, reproachful smile, and conducted Rafford through the dingy shop and up the creaking staircase. He followed her with curious sensations. She seemed to belong to such a different atmosphere from his now. He felt that he ought to class himself with Mrs. Budge as one of her 'cases.'

Gladys knocked at a door. A female voice bid them enter. Rafford followed her into the room, and saw Nigel Maystone, pale and emaciated, reclining in a chair, with a pretty, dark-haired girl bending over him.

At sight of him Maystone sat upright with a cry of glad surprise, and held out his hand. Rafford seized it with a warmth that was very foreign to his usual demeanour, and the two men looked at each other without speaking.

Rafford was not much given to sentimental attachments. But he had grown to like this visionary young man in old days with an intensity that had surprised himself. During the three years in which they had been separated it cannot be said that he had thought of him a great deal. He always lived too much in the passing moment to expend much thought on the absent. But when his illness had broken down the enclosure of hard worldliness in which he was too apt to enfold his mind, many soft feelings and memories had awakened in him, and his thoughts had wandered after the friend whose character had touched him so strangely. It was with genuine emotion that he now looked into that friend's wasted features.

As for Maystone, the meeting almost overcame him. The two individuals for whom he cherished the strongest and most romantic devotion of his life had come suddenly upon him in the miserable surroundings which seemed to have finally clutched him, and the emotions roused by such an event severely tried his exhausted nerves. He could only sit still, gazing first at one and then at the other with a look that touched the hearts of both. Rafford gave a final grip to his hand, dropped it, and began to talk in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Glad to have found you at last, old chap,' he said. 'I shan't lose sight of you again.'

Maystone smiled rather sadly, but took no notice of the remark.

'You look as if you had been very ill,' he said. 'Are you well again?'

'Pretty nearly, I think,' Rafford replied. 'I've had a cold lately, which accounts for my battered appearance, and I am really much better than I look. I shall go to the South Coast for a bit soon to pick up, and you'll have to come with me as soon as you can move.'

'I don't think that will be possible,' Maystone answered.

'There's no question about it; you're coming,' said Rafford decidedly. Gladys also joined in, and added her persuasion to the suggestion. Maystone's face showed embarrassment and trouble. He looked round at Nellie, who had withdrawn to the back of the room, and was listening to their remarks with evident uneasiness. She came forward, and looked imploringly at the visitors.

'Don't take him away from me,' she said in a trembling voice. 'Nobody can look after him as I will. I don't want to leave him.'

Rafford and Gladys gazed at each other awkwardly. Neither of them wished to distress her, but they felt that



consideration for her could not come first. She leaned over the back of Maystone's chair and laid her hands upon his shoulders.

'I knew how it would be,' she said in the same agitated tone. 'He will go back to them he came from. It isn't likely he'd stay with such as me. But you can do without him a little longer. It ain't too much to ask. Let me stay with him till he's well, and then he can choose for himself.'

'I have chosen already, Nellie,' said Maystone in a steady voice, though he lowered his eyes as he spoke. 'Whatever happens, I shall stick to you.'

'Ah, I doubt it—I doubt it!' she murmured plaintively. The embarrassment of the visitors increased. Though they had not discussed the subject, both of them had promptly concluded that Maystone was to be removed from his present surroundings. Gladys had fully made up her mind on this point, and had anticipated Nellie's opposition. She felt it necessary to intervene now, fearing that Maystone might say something further to complicate matters.

'You must not trouble him with a discussion now, Nellie,' she said. 'I know you want him to get well, and he will do it so much more quickly if he goes to the sea. You will know how he goes on.'

Nellie tightened her hold on Maystone's shoulders, and looked up at Gladys like a creature at bay.

'Take him!' she said; 'I can't stop you! He's all the world to me, but I don't matter. Couldn't you have found some one else as would do for you? Why do you want him?' Then a sudden light came into her eyes, and she laughed hysterically.

'I see what it is,' she said. 'What a fool I was! Of course, you're Gladys!'

Gladys gazed at her in astonishment.

'What do you mean?' she asked. 'My name is Gladys; but I don't understand.'

'I might have knowned it,' cried Nellie wildly. 'It's you that he's always thinking of. It's you as he talked about, night and day, when he was out of his mind with the fever. He was always calling to you, and you've heard him and come. He says he'll stick to me, but he's wanting you all the time. I said it would be so. I said he'd go back, but I didn't think it would come so soon!'

She sank on her knees on the floor behind his chair, covering her face with her hands. Maystone lay back against the cushions, pale and agitated. His eyes sought Gladys' face with an awkward, helpless look. Rafford cleared his throat huskily and turned to the window. It was many years since tears had been in his eyes, but his sight was curiously dim as he gazed out into the street.

Gladys hesitated a moment. The blood rushed to her face and ebbed away again. She moved irresolutely towards Nellie, and laid her hand on her shoulder. Nellie shook it off impatiently, and sprang to her feet.

'Ah,' she said, with a look of anguish, 'it don't seem fair! You've got so much already; and I haven't much worth having. You might have left him to me. But it's no good my talking. No, don't say anything, none of you. I can see it in your faces, and it's no good telling me lies about it. You're going to take him away, and it's what he wants, for all he may say.'

She knelt down beside Maystone's chair and kissed his hand.

'My darling,' she said, in a voice broken by sobs, 'you'll never find no one to love you as I do. But it ain't natural as you should stop with me. I'm not good enough

for you, and you'll be right to go, but it's a bit hard for me.'

Maystone was exhausted with emotion, and his lips could hardly frame a word for some seconds. He passed his hand over Nellie's hair, but his eyes were fixed on Gladys. The woman that he loved, the woman who had been the ideal and desire of his life, was looking at him with troubled, anxious eyes. He had the chance of going back into her world, of tasting the happiness of her society once more, perhaps of winning her love after all. He was unshaken in his resolution, and he put the temptation firmly aside, but it tried his strength. Even now the thought would thrust itself into his mind that this poor, heartbroken outcast had no possible claim on him; that he would be justified in the world's eyes if he tossed her out of his path. But he had not fixed his standard by the world's measure.

'Don't trouble yourself, Nellie,' he said faintly. 'You are frightening yourself without any cause.'

She lifted his hand from her head, and rose to her feet, holding it, while she looked into his face with passionate intensity.

'You're always good and kind,' she said. 'You let me down as easy as you can. But I can't fight against them as is stronger than me. Maybe you believe what you say now, but I know better.'

She took up her hat, pressed it on to her head, and moved towards the door, looking at him all the time with the same loving look of despair.

'Nellie, come back,' he cried in alarm. 'Where are you going? What do you mean to do?'

She smiled sadly.

'Don't frighten yourself,' she said. 'I shall come to no harm. I'm not going to jump into the river yet, I promise

you. I shall come back when your friends have gone, but I can't stand any more of this. You settle with them how much longer you can stay with me, and when it is over I shall know what to do.'

She turned back, bent over him, and kissed him once, very quietly. Then she glided out of the room.

## CHAPTER VII

### DON QUIXOTE RAMPANT

AFTER her departure there was an awkward silence. Rafford dropped on to a chair and looked uneasily at Maystone, who sat gazing abstractedly at the floor. Gladys had taken Rafford's place at the window, and was staring out into the street, her fingers playing nervously with the cord of the blind. After Nellie's remarks she was disinclined to meet Maystone's eyes, though his embarrassment had been even greater than hers. She was deeply moved by the revelation of this unchanging love which had existed through these hopeless, weary years. In her present mood of humility she felt shamed by it. He seemed so much nobler and higher than herself, and yet he did not know it. She swung the blind-cord impatiently. Even Nellie seemed a loftier figure.

Rafford coughed awkwardly, and smiled in rather an artificial manner.

'Things are a little bit complicated,' he said to Maystone, with a more or less successful effort at his usual matter-of-fact tone.

Maystone smiled. His rather plain face was lighted up in a way that made it quite good-looking. His eyes had a dreamy softness in them which ought to have excited Rafford's scorn, but somehow made him feel inclined to apologise.

'I don't think the complications will be very difficult to straighten out,' Maystone said.

'Well, but how are you going to manage about her?' asked Rafford. 'While this mood lasts it will be difficult to know what to do with her.'

'I don't see any difficulty,' said Maystone quietly.

'Of course it will be quite easy to provide for her somehow,' Rafford went on, still feeling that his tone was not in harmony with the look in his friend's eyes. 'But she seems inclined to be rather exacting at present. She may give some trouble.'

'When?'

'When she finds that—well, that you have other ties and other claims, and that she can't see as much of you as she has done so far.'

'I see what you mean,' said Maystone. 'You think my best plan will be to set her up comfortably somewhere, and keep her out of sight of the world which I am to mix with.'

'Well, I don't quite see what else you are to do—though, of course, you can tell best what you will be able to afford. I daresay you'll consider me a brute for suggesting it; but, really, old chap, I think it will be best if you can make up your mind to get rid of her altogether. Of course, I don't know exactly what your relations have been, or what claim she has on you.'

'I don't think that people would consider that she has any, beyond the fact that she has saved my life by her care,' Maystone replied.

Rafford was still puzzled by his tone.

'Of course, that simplifies matters,' he said. 'I don't want to be inquisitive, but are you very devoted to her?'

A faint movement stirred Maystone's features. He glanced at Gladys, who was still looking out of the window.

'I am very grateful to her, and very fond of her,' he answered in a low voice.

'But she is not exactly necessary to your existence?' asked Rafford.

'What has that got to do with it?'

'Well, you see, I think your wish to spare her feelings in her present mood is very fine; you are most generous about her; but still you must see that it is only a passing matter to her, while it may mean a drag on your life if you keep up a connection with her. It isn't as if you were rich and could provide for her easily.'

He stopped and looked at Maystone with uncertainty. Maystone smiled again.

'What is your suggestion?' he asked.

'Well, we're old friends—I know you won't be offended—what I would suggest is that you should let me arrange matters for you. I'm sure you had better bring things to an end. I'll explain it all to her, and tell her that she won't lose by all her kindness to you. I'll set her up in business, and give her money enough to keep her going, and very likely she'll marry some man in her own class, and be quite happy. Do let me do this, old chap. You needn't have any ridiculous pride about such a thing with me.'

Maystone smiled again, and held out his hand.

'You always were a good fellow,' he said. 'I would be glad to be under any obligation to you. I know, from your point of view, that everything you say is most sensible. But you don't understand the least bit in the world.'

'But what other course is there?' Rafford asked. 'What are you to do with her when you leave here?'

'I am not going to leave here.'

Gladys dropped the blind-cord and turned round abruptly. Maystone flushed a little, and his eyes rested on her for a moment with a wistful, sad gaze. Then he turned to Rafford again with the same smile as before.

'Look here,' he said; 'I daresay you think me a hope-

less fool. Goodness knows, I appreciate your wish to help me and your generous offer. I don't look at these things from the same point as you do, and very likely I am wrong. But whatever happens to me in the future, Nellie will share it with me as long as she chooses.'

'But she's sure not to choose it for long,' exclaimed Rafford. 'She's certain to change. She'll desert you for some one else, and you'll have wasted your life to no purpose.'

'What is it to waste one's life? Does the world to which you want me to go back make a better use of its life, when all is said and done? Is there much more to show at the end? Listen to me, dear old friend. A little time ago I thought that I had been chasing a phantom for the last three years; that I had wasted my life, as you say. I had looked for a duty; and because I didn't seem to find it, I thought that I must have looked in the wrong place. But, after all, I have found it.'

'But you haven't. It isn't a duty. It's a delusion.'

'I don't think so. I believe that these things are arranged. God — Fate — whatever you like to call the Power that guides our lives, has put plainly enough before me what I have got to do. Here is a human soul, full of possibilities for happiness or misery, good or evil. It has been thrust into my hands, to shape a little or to throw away, as I like. I am not going to shirk the responsibility. I had great dreams before of helping to change the lot of a whole class, of working on a big scale. I see now that I wasn't fitted or intended for any such business, but such as I am capable of is offered to me now. Could I say the same if I went back to my old life? Is there a single human being whose existence I could affect in the way that I can affect this girl's? I might drag out my days in the usual respectable, conventional fashion, liked by a few people, influ-



encing a few perhaps ; but I should fill no hole that some one else could not fill equally well, and when I died I should make no blank, and leave no legacy in the hearts of any one, except a little passing regret. But if I stay here and link my life with Nellie's, not in the condescending way you would not object to, but as a comrade and a fellow-creature of the same flesh and blood, it may make some of the difference to her between Hell and Heaven ; and from this influence there may possibly grow a wider influence, which will help me to bring a little sunshine into other gloomy lives. It may be all a delusion, as you say, and I may find that I have wasted my life. Even that won't matter much. If I find that I am mistaken, and learn that, after all, I should be of more use in your world, I will think about going back to it. But so long as Nellie remains as she is now, I stay here.'

Rafford could not speak. He believed that the intention of his friend was hopelessly wrong, that he was contemplating a woful mistake ; and yet something prevented him from opposing it further. Though Maystone's position seemed untenable from every point of view, worldly or otherwise, something in his heart forbade him to attack it again.

Gladys had come close to Maystone's chair, and was looking at him silently. Her eyes glistened with what looked like moisture. He turned to her, smiling still.

'You have been very good to me,' he said. 'If anything was wanting to add to my gratitude—perhaps you will allow me to say my affection—for both of you, it would not be wanting now. I hope I shall see you again sometimes, and yet I am not sure if it wouldn't be best not. Anyhow, I won't keep you any longer now. It is getting late.'

But they protested against leaving him so soon, and sat

down to talk about everyday matters. None of them uttered another word respecting the subject they had discussed; but they chatted for a long time, in a quiet, friendly way, of past days and old associates. When Rafford and Gladys at last rose to go, the sun had set, and it was quite dark in the room, except for the gleam of the gas-lit street through the window. They lighted his lamp and put it beside him, with some books which Gladys had lent him.

'This has been a great pleasure for me,' he said, looking at them affectionately, as he pressed their hands in turn. 'You must not repeat it too often, or I shall be spoiled. However, I hope soon to be out and about again, and shall be looking for work and settling down, so there won't be very many opportunities of seeing you. I shan't ask you to my wedding,' he went on with a smile. 'It will be a very quiet affair.'

Rafford gasped.

'Do you mean to say you are going to marry her?' he asked.

'Certainly; I think it is only fair to her.'

Neither of them said anything more. Gladys looked at him with a strange light in her eyes, and he returned her gaze with a lingering intensity that touched her to the heart. Then they went out of the room in silence.

Mrs. Budge favoured them with a maudlin farewell as they passed through the shop. She had apparently indulged in another thimbleful.

It was dark in the street outside, and the scattered lamps were lighted. The sky above was clear and pale, and on the housetops towards the west was the fringe of a crimson glow, where the sun had recently set. They walked on through the shabby, monotonous little streets. Gladys remained in silent thought, and Rafford did not attempt to disturb it. Untidy women gossiped here and there, and

children played noisily in the roadway between the lines of low, featureless houses. Occasionally they passed a butcher's shop, flaring with gas and hideous with naked joints, in front of which the proprietor clamoured, in a strident voice, for all who passed to come and buy, assuring them of the low price of his wares. This was the world in which they were leaving their friend—a real world, as real as their own. It seemed to Gladys as if this great, noisy, crowded city had swallowed them all up, as if individuality were dying out in its jealous grasp. It was not till they were approaching her door in Sloane Street that she began to feel again as if she belonged to herself, and she looked back on the man they had left as on one who had been engulfed and hidden in a bottomless sea. There was a curious strained feeling in her heart, and she wanted badly to get indoors and be alone and try to arrange her ideas.

On her doorstep she turned and looked up into Rafford's face. It was very grave and thoughtful. She felt grateful to him for not talking. She began to be conscious once more of his tact and sympathy, to feel that her closely-walled heart was softening towards him. The knowledge startled her, and she tried to appear rebellious and defiant.

'I suppose you think him an awful fool,' she said.

Rafford looked at her with the old steady gaze which had haunted her memory for so long.

'Yes,' he answered slowly, 'I think him a fool. But if there were more fools like him, this world would be a better place than it is.'

'Can even *you* see that?' she asked, hiding the softening of her heart by the bitterness of her tone. It stung him, but she was still powerless to overcome his self-control.

'You are rather hard on me,' he remarked quietly. 'But I did not suppose that you would ever forgive me.'

She flushed a little.

'I forgave you long ago, if there was anything to forgive,' she answered. 'I have done what was much harder—I have forgiven myself. But I can't quite forget!'

'Do you hate me very much?' he asked, in the same quiet tone.

'I don't hate you at all. I even respect you a little.'

'Oh, please don't!' he exclaimed. 'That's much worse.'

They both laughed, and felt that they had suddenly become friends again.

## CHAPTER VIII

### EX MACHINA

DICK RENNETT had been released from prison early that morning. He had come out weak and sickly, with a fever of hatred and resentment burning in his heart. He did not approve of State interference when the State interfered with himself.

Through the long, solitary hours his excited brain had been working fiercely. The misery of his whole life seemed to pass in review before him as he sat in his dismal cell, toiling with smarting fingers at his enforced labour. Never had he known happiness. Want, hunger, cold, despair, had been his constant companions. But bitterest of all had been the hopeless struggle of his bruised vanity. He never had doubted his own greatness or hesitated in his belief that, with favourable opportunities, he would have excelled all the self-satisfied mediocrities whom circumstances exalted so far above himself. His passionate advocacy of the claims of his class was in the main a personal feeling, roused by his savage jealousy of the advantages possessed by members of the classes above. He had no desire for luxury or comfort. He could endure material hardships without repining, except when one of his frequent periods of increased ill-health roused a rebellious desire in his exhausted frame for those alleviations of suffering which money could so easily obtain. But the thought never left him that he was an exceptional man.

He had educated himself to a considerable degree in an unsystematic, one-sided way. And his knowledge of some subjects combined with his hopeless ignorance of many others to foster in him a profound sense of his own wisdom and learning. He honestly believed that the upper classes conspired to crush such dangerous people as himself, fearing lest he should open the eyes of his own order to the deception practised upon them by greedy capitalists and selfish landlords. He regarded them as altogether outside the sphere of human feeling. And he was firmly convinced that he, in the first place, and a few other people a long way after him, alone took a just, honest, or generous view of the social system.

His hatred of Maystone, so far as it had any other ground than the blind instinct of a diseased nature, was based on this prejudice. He simply could not believe that a member of the class to which Maystone belonged was capable of an unselfish interest in his poorer brothers, and could only regard him as a spy. Further, the fact of Maystone's better education fed his jealousy. He had no doubt of his own intellectual superiority, and lived in constant dread lest men such as this one, by mere advantages of training and education, should obtain an influence at all commensurate with his own.

He had many enemies in his party for this reason, and had never worked harmoniously with the enthusiastic recruits who came from the educated classes to fight in the same ranks with himself. But his energy and ability had won him such a position amongst the most ignorant and violent, that he could afford to separate himself from the more intelligent and moderate, who were yet compelled to acknowledge his influence.

Almost the only soft feeling which he had ever known related to Nellie Ruster. To such an absolute egoist, love

had meant a good deal more of receiving than of giving. But still he had loved her, in a wild, ferocious sort of way, and the thought of her had haunted him much since their separation. He desired to get her back, and the idea that she might prefer any one else drove him into frenzy. If she would not belong to him, she should belong to no one else. In the stress of other occupation he had lost sight of her for a time. He would let nothing keep him from trying to get her now.

His release from prison had been attended by disappointment. He had expected to be met by sympathetic and admiring friends, and to be treated as a martyr and a hero. But, thanks to the thoughtlessness of brutal officials, who released him at a much earlier hour than was expected, the demonstration was not prepared in time.

He made his way to the house of the friends with whom he lodged, a prey to physical suffering, debility, resentment, and tortured vanity. He felt at war with the whole of mankind. The man was at work, and the wife was too much occupied with family affairs to pay him the attention which he considered that he merited. After having some food, he retired to his own room and brooded, read, and wrote for hours, the bitterness of his soul increasing the while. In the afternoon he went out and took his way to Chelsea.

He arrived in Mrs. Budge's shop, and thumped impatiently on the counter. The old woman came out of the little room at the back, and looked at him with bleared, stupid eyes.

'Is Nellie upstairs?' he asked.

'What's that to you?'

He glared at her with a ferocity that was perceptible even to her muddled brain, and frightened her a little.

'Don't try any games with me,' he said. 'Is she in?'

'No, she ain't. She went out about a quarter of an hour ago.'

'Where has she gone to?'

'I don't know. But what's it got to do with you? She don't want you now, anyhow.'

He cursed her savagely, and turned to leave the shop. Suddenly he turned upon her.

'You've lied,' he said. 'I heard voices upstairs.'

'She ain't there, if you did.'

'Who *is* there?'

'The man as she's took up with. Lor' bless you, do you think she was going to keep on with such stuff as you.' She laughed in a silly, drunken fashion.

He grew calm at once, though his face was not pleasant to look at.

'I don't want to interfere with her,' he said in a thick voice. 'I only looked in to see how she was getting on. Tell me all about it.'

Mrs. Budge was not given to resentment, and loved a gossip. She told him all about it, with sundry comments unsuitable for publication.

'Do you know what his name is?' Rennett asked with the same forced calm.

'I think it's Maystone,' she said. 'He's a different sort to you. Why, he's got friends as wouldn't look at you. There's a lady and gentleman with him now—a *real* lady and gentleman, I can tell you.'

Rennett smiled disagreeably. His hand fumbled in his pocket. There was a large knife there.

'How long are they going to stay?' he asked.

'Till Nellie comes back,' she answered. 'They'll be some little time longer, I expect.'

Rennett turned and left the shop. His brain seemed on the point of bursting. He walked aimlessly through the



streets, feeling for the knife in his pocket, and hardly noticing where he went. He muttered to himself from time to time, and people stopped to look at him.

He wandered on to the Embankment, and leaned on the parapet for some time, looking at the river. His brain seemed to be working hard, and yet he scarcely realised anything clearly. It did not occur to him that he was tired or weak, but his legs began to drag heavily.

It would not do to go back yet. It would be better to wait till after dark. The visitors would have gone by that time; and if he waited for Nellie to be out of the way for a minute or two, as she was sure to be at some time, he might step in and get at Maystone while he was alone. Beyond that his ideas did not go.

He turned into the grounds of the old hospital; they were quiet and peaceful. A white-haired pensioner sauntered here and there, and a few children were playing on the grass. He made his way to the avenue, and sat down on a seat amongst the black-stemmed trees.

He sat quite still for a long time, sunk in a sort of stupor.

Meanwhile Nellie had also been wandering about Chelsea in a state of mental perturbation. Her light, shallow nature was incapable of the passionate agitation which was consuming Rennett. But at the time when she left the house she was certainly undergoing the weight of a stronger feeling of despair than she had ever experienced before. She clung to Maystone so fervently, she wanted to keep him, she could not bear the thought of losing him; but, all the same, she anticipated his being taken away from her. The fear roused in her a storm of which the strength terrified her.

Gradually, however, it calmed down. After all, he might possibly have spoken the truth when he had promised to

stay with her. She had still got him, and it was not absolutely certain that she could not keep him. Overawed by the presence of his wealthy friends, she had inclined naturally to the darkest view. But now that she was out of their reach, she began to think that they were not so formidable after all, that perhaps her influence would be as strong as theirs. Men had loved her before. Perhaps this man did too.

Anyhow, she would not return till they were quite certain to have gone. She also drifted on to the Embankment, and sat on the seat where she had last sat with him, and thought of him with fond melancholy and a little hope. She looked at the river and smiled. She wasn't such a fool as to try *that* remedy yet. To her pleasure-loving nature life was too good a thing to be lightly thrown away.

It was a beautiful afternoon. The sun was sinking in the west, meeting a solid-looking mass of white cloud, whose rim he dyed with crimson and flame-colour and gold. The river was almost blue beneath the clear, pale sky; and the atmosphere was so unusually free from smoke, that outlines of trees and houses stood out with sharp distinction, while unsuspected washes of colour were evident in all directions. Nellie's uneducated faculties were unable to take any reasoning pleasure in the artistic harmonies of the scene; but, nevertheless, she could not help feeling their influence, and her spirits grew lighter and her nerves ceased their fretting.

She rose and wandered along the Embankment till she reached the gate of the hospital—the memorial of the kind heart of a woman as frail as herself. She entered, and wandered across the grass, feeling inclined to join in the games of the children who were playing there. After her long spell of watching and labour in the sickroom, she also felt like a child let out of school. The despair of an hour

before had completely faded from her mind. She turned into the avenue and sauntered down it, the graceful lines of the bare trees appealing even to her cockney soul. It all seemed very peaceful and soothing. There was no one near except a man, who appeared to be asleep, on one of the benches. She passed him, and he looked up. She started back with an exclamation as she recognised Rennett.

His face was that of a skeleton, showing the form of every bone. His close-cropped hair heightened the effect of its fleshlessness. His eyes burned deep in his head, with a cold, hard glitter.

He sprang to his feet and seized her by the wrist, looking into her eyes with the glare of a wild beast. She had plenty of physical courage, and returned the stare defiantly

‘I’ve been round to look for you,’ he said.

‘Have you? Well, you need not do it again. I don’t want you.’

‘I’ve found out what you’re up to.’

‘I don’t care what you’ve found out,’ she replied. ‘It’s no affair of yours.’

‘We’ll see about that a little later.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that I’m going to do for this precious pal of yours before I’m very much older,’ he hissed through his teeth.

Nellie laughed scornfully.

‘You talk very fine,’ she said. ‘But you don’t touch him, I can tell you. You’ve got to reckon with me first, and I’m not afraid of you.’

He dropped her wrist and drew back a step with his hand in his pocket. His face was working with fury.

‘Once for all,’ he said in a hoarse, low tone, ‘will you give him up? I won’t interfere with him if he goes.’

All I want is to get you back, and no one shall stand in my way.'

She laughed again, regardless of the madness in his eyes.

'Do you think I'd give him up for the likes of *you*?' she exclaimed. 'Why, you ain't fit for him to wipe his boots on!'

Rennett's face became livid and distorted. His hand came quickly out of his pocket, claspings the knife. He opened it with a snap.

Nellie started back with a cry of terror. But he leaped upon her and drove the knife into her bosom twice, with short, fierce stabs. She gave a little shuddering groan, and sank in a quivering heap at his feet. Her hands feebly clutched at his legs for a moment, and then she lay still.

Rennett came to himself at once, like a man awakening from a dream. He looked wildly round at the trees, at the grass, at the blue sky above, and then down again at the motionless bundle of clothes, from under which a red stream was slowly beginning to trickle. He heard children screaming and men shouting. The whole scene rocked and swung around him. He dimly realised that people were running towards him.

He gave a quick, choking sob. Then he slashed the knife across his own throat, and fell, gasping and gurgling, on to her body.



## BOOK VI



## CHAPTER I

### THE TURNING OF TIME'S GLASS

CHARLIE RAFFORD passed a troubled night after his visit to Maystone. His meeting with Gladys had disturbed him very much, more than she had suspected, and the agitation of the other events of the day had told upon him a good deal. His illness had altered him considerably, and his nerves were not so strong as they had been. He was far from well now. A disturbed night was a common experience, due to purely physical causes; with so much mental upheaval, it was not to be wondered at if he slept badly.

He rose next morning with a feeling of lassitude and depression, and fretted nervously during breakfast. What was he to do? He could not allow Maystone to sacrifice himself in the useless and hopeless way which he contemplated, and yet it was very difficult to know what means could be taken to prevent him. Rafford acknowledged to himself with mingled annoyance and admiration that practical arguments would have no weight with a man whose conduct was entirely regulated by unpractical considerations. Would it be of any use to interfere further?

He looked at his pile of letters. There were many things which he ought to be doing. The wooing of a constituency was no light task. He had to propitiate the combination of vanity, prejudice, and self-interest which the vast majority



of the electors offered for the consideration of their would-be representative. Apparently they wished to be cajoled and flattered into voting according to their own beliefs—a remarkable instance of diffidence and self-abnegation. By the time he had read and answered the various epistles he began to feel as if life were a big comic opera. He rose from the table with a sigh of relief, went out, got into a cab, and drove off to Chelsea. He felt that he could not rest till he had seen Maystone again and endeavoured once more to alter his determination.

But when he arrived at Mrs. Budge's shop he found that Destiny had taken the matter out of his hands. Late the night before the news of the terrible occurrence in the hospital grounds had drifted round to Nellie's acquaintances. Her body had been identified, and Maystone had been apprised of what had happened.

Rafford learned these particulars from Mrs. Budge, interspersed with copious lamentations. She was genuinely distressed by poor Nellie's fate. But the importance it gave her, and the constant stream of inquirers which it brought to the shop, were some alleviation. Rafford pushed his way through the gossiping throng, and went up to Maystone's room. Mrs. Budge had nobly protected him from inquisitive intrusion.

Rafford was alarmed lest the news should have caused some disastrous change in his friend's condition. But, to his relief, he found that Maystone, though much distressed, was not seriously injured by the shock. He had lived through so much during the last three years, that it seemed as if nothing could now affect him very deeply. Moreover, his feeling towards Nellie had never been anything more than one of gratitude and sympathy; and Rafford could not help suspecting that, in spite of his grief for her unhappy end, it was to a certain extent a relief to him to find that his

contemplated sacrifice was no longer necessary, even if he were unconscious of such a sensation. For Rafford could not but believe that it would have been a sacrifice, however willing, and sacrifices cost their price.

For himself, he was candidly glad that the problem should have solved itself. He was sorry for the poor girl. He had been touched by her devotion to Maystone and her pathetic fear of losing him. But having only seen her once, it was hardly to be expected that he could weigh her life against that of his friend, and he had regarded Maystone's contemplated action as nothing less than suicide. At the same time, the horror of the affair oppressed him strongly. He now began to realise the feelings of the class to whom Surrey-side melodrama and police reports do not seem vulgar; a distinct step in his education.

His cab was waiting outside; and after a few words with Maystone on the recent event, he began to collect all the articles of apparel and male possessions which he could see in the room and tie them up in a bundle. They were not numerous. Maystone watched him uneasily, evidently understanding his plan, and discussing its acceptance with himself. When everything was collected, Rafford said—

‘Do you think you could walk downstairs if I help you?’

‘I daresay I could. Why do you ask?’

‘Because you are coming away with me.’

Maystone looked at him with doubtful eyes.

‘I think I ought to stay,’ he said, with a hesitating voice.

Rafford's reply was to put his arm round him and lift him out of the chair. In spite of his ill-health, he still retained a good deal of his remarkable strength.

Maystone protested feebly, but his will was not sufficiently concentrated to allow him to resist. Rafford got him downstairs, and Mrs. Budge, clamouring to the idlers in the shop to get out of the way, came to his assistance. They guided

the tottering figure to the cab, and helped him to get in. He sank back against the cushions, gazing through the window at the gaping throng, and feeling as if Fate had closed a strange chapter in his life. Somehow he could not resist further. His days in the dingy street were clearly ended, and Destiny had something else in store for him. He looked round at the unattractive houses with curious new sensations. Then Rafford got into the cab, leaned out to press two or three sovereigns into the palm of the speechless Mrs. Budge, shouted to the cabman to start, and in another minute they were rolling away towards the world which Maystone had left so long.

Mrs. Budge returned to her shop in a state of stupor. She turned out all the visitors except one or two special cronies, after which she closed the door and put up the shutters. Then she proceeded to get helplessly drunk in the most simple and unassuming fashion.

At Rafford's lodgings in St. James's there was, fortunately, an unoccupied bedroom, which he at once engaged, and settled Maystone in it. He made himself responsible for the rent, instructed his servant to attend to all his friend's wants, and gave him orders to purchase everything that could be required. As Maystone's possessions were almost limited to the clothes he wore, and *they* were only fit to be thrown away, this meant a good deal. He was very reluctant to take so great advantage of Rafford's generosity, but he was unable to resist the friendly pressure that was put upon him. He spent much thought in trying to devise some future scheme by which he could hope to repay the expenditure. But Rafford only laughed when he mentioned the subject, and said that he had appointed him his secretary for the present, and would expect to have all his letters answered in return for Maystone's board and lodging. Maystone, who was daily becoming stronger, was really able

to assist him in this way, though, of course, his work was not commensurate with the benefits he received. But he felt that Rafford was the one man in the world to whom he was willing to rest under an obligation. And if heartfelt gratitude and affection have any value, Rafford was certainly repaid.

As he was not a rich man, and was short of money at the present time, his conduct was really rather creditable.

The time wore on, and Maystone made rapid progress towards complete recovery. To his great relief, he was not required to give evidence at the inquest which followed Rennett's crime; and he was given the further satisfaction of knowing that, thanks to Rafford's generosity, poor Nellie was buried in decent fashion, and not lost amongst the forgotten dust of the nameless poor. Such prompt measures had been taken with Rennett, that there was at one time a possibility of saving his life, presumably with the object of taking it away again; but, in spite of the skill of the doctors, he ungratefully died, and robbed science and justice alike of a triumph.

Maystone could not resist the cheering influence of his new circumstances. To have a bath and a clean shirt every day, to know that there was food for him when he was hungry, decently cooked and served in cleanliness, to be free from the countless material discomforts of poverty as well as from its haunting anxiety,—all helped to restore him rapidly to health and spirits. There was, of course, uncertainty still about his future; but Rafford had many influential friends, and was confident of obtaining some employment for him so soon as he was well enough to undertake it. His prospects were really reassuring. He felt that his course had been decided for him, and had no compunction about accepting his altered destiny. Never for a moment did he regret the past three years, but he had no desire to repeat their experience.

Soon he was able to go out of doors ; and though the wintry weather compelled him to be cautious, he rejoiced in the thrill of reviving strength as he wandered through the streets and parks. Needless to say, one of the first journeys he made was to Sloane Street, to visit Gladys Presterley. In a short time it became a regular habit with him to call there, and again he revelled in that congenial companionship. He scarcely looked forward into the future, and the hopelessness of attempting to approach Gladys as a suitor seemed to him obvious from every point of view. But at any rate he could enjoy the present, as some delicious dream. He found her more adorable than ever. The same gentle tact, the same ready sympathy, the same imaginative outlook on life, half sad, half humorous. She was graver than of old, and he did not think she seemed altogether happy. But as he gradually gained some insight into the misery she had undergone in her married life—a misery which his just estimate of her character and of the requirements of her temperament enabled him to realise—he was not surprised to find that the shadow had not yet passed off. Though she always spoke of her dead husband without any trace of bitterness, and even sometimes with half-penitent regard, it was clear that she did not deceive herself sufficiently to regret his death. Maystone, who remembered Presterley, could not blame her.

What surprised him a good deal was that Rafford never went to see her. He knew that they had been great friends in the old days, though he had never suspected the existence of any stronger feeling between them. But it gradually became clear to him that something had clouded their friendship. Gladys seemed to like to talk of Rafford. She inquired often as to his work, his progress in his candidature, and other personal matters. But she never evinced any surprise at the way in which he kept aloof

from her. Rafford, on the other hand, seemed to avoid the subject as much as possible. His old habit of speaking with ironical flippancy of nearly all matters appeared to have grown upon him considerably. And he scarcely ever mentioned her, except in jest, though the jest was never ill-natured.

As time went on, it became evident that the two men were changing places. Maystone grew daily stronger and more alive. Rafford was perpetually in poor health. He fought against it, and his spirits remained at their usual placid level. But he seemed to be losing interest in his plans and ambitions. His work bored him, and his parliamentary designs lost all attraction for him. Nothing but a stubborn determination not to give in to his weakness induced him to continue his candidature.

One day, however, he came in, very white and tired, and sank wearily into an armchair.

'I'm going to chuck up the sponge after all, old chap,' he said.

Maystone looked at him with the gravest concern. He had never realised before how much he was altered. The sturdy young man of three years ago had become haggard and broken, and quite middle-aged.

'I expect you want a rest,' he rejoined. 'You'll be all right when the winter is over.'

Rafford smiled with sad irony.

'If I stay in this climate much longer,' he answered, 'I am likely to get a rest that it will be difficult to disturb.'

Maystone felt his heart sink into depths of utter desolation.

'Is it as bad as that?' he asked, in a low voice.

Rafford laughed, and looked at him with an unusually soft gaze.

'You're a good old fellow to mind so much,' he said.

'But I'm not going to die just yet if I can help it. I have seen the doctor to-day, and he tells me that it is more than my life is worth to stay in England any longer. He wanted me to go off to Davos, or some other infernal death-trap, but I declined that. I said I would rather die standing up than lying down. Even if my lungs are in the unholy state he makes out, I'm not useless yet.'

He paused, and coughed with a hollow sound.

'What do you intend to do?' Maystone asked.

'Pack up my things and go to South Africa. There's still something for men to do there, and the climate is splendid for people with rebellious lungs. The doctor isn't over sanguine about it, but he says it is quite possible I may last a long time out there, and very likely get no worse. He even held out to me as an encouragement that I might die eventually of something else, though I don't see that it much matters.'

Maystone felt as if some terrible shadow were hiding all the sunshine. He stumbled across the room and held out his hand.

'I'm awfully sorry,' he murmured lamely, in a broken voice.

Rafford laughed again as he pressed his hand, and then dropped it.

'You mustn't take it that way,' he said. 'After all, life is as good in one place as in another—perhaps better—and death is not such a certain evil either. I shan't lose much by the change of country. To tell the truth, I'm a little tired of civilisation and town-life and all this humbug of politics and the law and all the rest of it. I *was* rather keen on showing the world that I wasn't an utter fool, but it was a silly little ambition, and it doesn't cost much to give it up. For the rest, there are one or two people I am sorry to leave, but they aren't numerous nowadays, and as

likely as not I shall see you and others out there sometimes. There'll still be sunshine and blue sky, and perhaps one or two warm hearts to be found here and there; and when all is said and done, life doesn't offer one much that is worth more than these. Why, if I were twenty years younger, people would think it the most natural thing in the world for me to go there. Why shouldn't one begin life again at forty as well as at twenty?'

'For yourself it doesn't matter so much. But you must expect your friends to feel it a little. I owe more to you than I can say. But apart from that, which I know you regard as nothing, you are more to me than all the rest of the world put together, except one foolish dream. I only wish I could go to the Fates, and tell them that if they *must* have a victim, they could take me instead of you.'

Rafford looked at him with the old air of kindly mockery.

'I know you would,' he said. 'But there is no question of victims. The Fates are much kinder than you think, and some of the old ideas are truer than we are willing to confess in these days. You are wanted here more than I am. I can guess what your foolish dream is, and I hope and believe that some day it may become a wise reality.'

After this he refused to talk seriously any more, and entered with a humorous delight, which was quite juvenile, on the task of composing a sufficiently pompous farewell to the constituency whose suffrages he had been hoping to win. Maystone had to use all his powers of persuasion to prevent his sending off the first draft, which was a veritable burlesque.



## CHAPTER II

### TWILIGHT

GLADYS was, on the whole, relieved by Rafford's abstention from visiting her, and yet at times she was slightly disposed to regret it. That her passion for him had been absolutely killed she did not doubt. The very thought of it filled her with indignation and self-reproach. She had laid herself at his feet, and he had thrust her on one side. She had offered him her love, her reputation, her very soul, and he had contemptuously declined the offering. Yet the embers smouldered on. She loved him still in a way, though she would have died rather than that he should know it. No inducement would have persuaded her to marry him; but she felt that she could never marry any one else, or that if she did, it would merely mean the laying of her dead hopes upon the altar, the final requiem of the romance of life. Life without this romance of passion seemed a saltless dish. But she was gradually bringing herself to accept it, and no thought of allowing the old embers to be blown into a flame was ever permitted to remain in her mind.

She would have been very glad if the embers had died altogether. She would have seized with fervent eagerness the hope of such a passion rising again for any one else. But she knew that there was no such hope. Her heart had spent its treasure of gold, and there was only silver left. Day after day, when Maystone came and sat with her, she

used to look at him and wish that she could fall in love with him. She had been touched to the heart by the revelation of his constant devotion to her. The episode of Nellie Ruster did not affect the fact that his faith had never swerved. She felt mean and contemptible when she thought that it was out of her power to return this devotion. She admired him, looked up to him, and cherished a warm affection for him. He interested her mind and satisfied her taste. She enjoyed his companionship, looked for his sympathy, felt that her happiness was in a sense bound up with his welfare. But the old unreasoning fervour and yearning was absolutely unknown. Her pulse never changed, her heart never beat quicker when he came or went. If he had come and told her that he was about to marry some one else, it would scarcely have caused her any emotion beyond friendly interest, and perhaps the faint prick of female vanity.

Yet she could not help comparing him favourably with the other men who pursued her. They came in battalions and invested her position. She tried the game of friendship with one after another; but all who interested her in the least, and many who did not, speedily developed a tendency to play the lover. Even Lord St. Pancras startled her in the middle of conversation one day by saying abruptly, 'I say, Mrs. Presterley, don't you think we might marry each other—what?' But as he was not the least disconcerted when she laughingly declined the honour, perhaps it was only a temporary aberration. To say that she disliked all this admiration would be untrue. What woman ever did who could get it? But directly they became serious, she found them a nuisance, and crushed the sprouting hopes ruthlessly.

She often interrogated Maystone about Rafford. It pleased her to hear the generous enthusiasm which her questions

evoked. It seemed to put both men in such a pleasant light, and she wished to regard Rafford in a pleasant light, in spite of some lingering shreds of resentment. It was only in the silent hours of the night, now and then, that her spirit cried aloud in bitter revolt against him and Fate.

For she could not help feeling that her life was wasted and aimless, that she was drifting across the dark sea and finding no land. Though there seemed nothing left in life to hope for or to fear, she was still restless, dissatisfied, and expectant. She began to regard this as the condition of mind to which she was doomed for the remainder of her days.

One day when Maystone was talking of his vague future in his old sanguine way, as if he never doubted that things would come right in the end for him and for the world, she asked him suddenly—

‘Are you satisfied or contented? Or do you ever expect to be?’

He looked at her with the serious eyes which somehow always awakened a smile in her own, half amused, half sympathetic.

‘No,’ he answered, ‘I never expect to be. Satisfaction and content are only fit for pigs. But hope is the privilege of humanity—hope that is quite indifferent to its own apparent non-fulfilment.’

‘I believe you are talking nonsense,’ she said. ‘And yet I believe you are right.’

She was quite grave for a long time afterwards, thinking over his somewhat commonplace remark.

‘I am afraid I want more from life than it has to give,’ she said at last with a sigh.

‘I hope you do,’ he answered. ‘To do that is the only thing that makes life worth living.’

‘What is the good of going on endlessly grasping at shadows?’ she asked wearily.

'Well, one must take some definite attitude towards life, and things are apt to become more or less what you choose to imagine them. After all, what you get is of very small importance compared with what you give.'

She looked at him with such serious intentness, that he was embarrassed.

'I think you are rather a consoling person,' she said.

'I am very glad to hear it,' he replied with a shy laugh. After this he was almost as nervous and constrained with her, for some time, as he had been in the days of their first acquaintance.

She certainly found his companionship very cheering and calming. He was still shy and awkward when any one else was present, and seemed almost a child in the artificial graces of the world. But he had gained a strength of character and a depth of thought in the years of his exile which had only existed in embryo before. In old days she had felt as if she were leading him. Now she almost unconsciously looked up to him, and his judgment influenced her thoughts. It was rather refreshing to have such a prop once more. Independent and self-reliant as she was, it was weary work to walk quite alone.

For a long time she was very grateful to him for the attitude of restraint and deference which he preserved towards her. He never uttered a word or gave a sign which could indicate a desire on his part to draw closer to her. She began to think that he was content to be merely a friend, and to hope that she might enjoy this pleasant friendship indefinitely. But after a time she found herself wondering whether she had not been mistaken all along, and whether he had ever wished for anything more than friendship. She was ashamed to confess it to herself, but the thought was not entirely acceptable. She found herself

wondering what he would be like as a lover, and half wishing to have her curiosity gratified. Then Rafford's shadow seemed to fall across her path, and she impatiently drove the thought from her mind.

One day Maystone arrived in a state of agitation and depression. He had just heard from Rafford the mournful news concerning his health. Gladys turned very white when he told her.

'Don't you think he exaggerates the matter?' she asked in a faltering tone.

'I wish I *could* think so. But I am afraid it is more likely to be the other way. He has such unconquerable pluck, that he will fight to the last. But in my own mind I have no doubt that we shall never see him again.'

'When is he going to start for Africa?'

'In quite a short time, as soon as he can get things settled. Apart from every other consideration, it does seem hard lines, just as he was on the threshold of a career at last.'

Gladys shuddered. She remembered how much she had done towards inducing him to embark on that career. She would have given a good deal at that moment to roll back the tide of time for a couple of years, just to taste again one moment of that unforgotten period. She realised now how superficial had been her feeling of anger and resentment. She did not repent, she did not regret anything that had happened. If the old time could be revived, she would play the same cards as recklessly again, and hope to win.

But she came to herself again, and remembered that the past was dead, and that he was dead with it. She was very sorry for him, and the momentary pang of grief had been sharp. But all her thoughts in connection with him now were of too sombre a hue to be easily darkened. The

chapter had ended so long before, that this gloomy post-script added little to it. She really was more distressed on Maystone's account than on Rafford's.

'It is an awful blow for you,' she said gently. 'After all, it is not so bad for him. He has played the game, and has not always lost. It is a doubtful game at the best, and when one sees the end of it drawing on, one need not be very much distressed. Honestly, I am more sorry for you.'

He was moved and touched by her words.

'Don't encourage me to think of myself in the matter,' he answered. 'I won't have the affectation of pretending that it has not cast me adrift altogether. I know you won't believe that I am callous about *him* when I say that for the moment it nearly drove me to despair. It's selfish to think of one's self, but there haven't been many people in my life who mattered very much. It isn't easy to part with almost the last one.'

She sprang up in her old impulsive way, and held out her hand to him, while tears swam in her eyes.

'Not absolutely the last one,' she exclaimed.

The colour rushed to his face as he took her hand in his. It looked curiously soft and white between his brown fingers, marked and blunted by the hard usage of his recent life. He bent over the slender hand and kissed it passionately. Then he looked at her awkwardly, muttered a confused apology, and blundered out of the room.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and went to the window. There was a faint flutter of agitation in her heart. She almost regretted her impulse and its consequences. Things had gone so smoothly till now; it seemed a pity to let anything disturb their uneventful course. Then she thought of Rafford again with an ache of dull despair. It was terrible to think of him in sickness and misery, and

to know that she had not the right, and scarcely the wish, to go to him. But he and she had both been dead a long time. They had little in common with the two who had lived through that short, broken dream in the buried years.

Maystone had left the house in a profound state of mental abstraction. He scarcely noticed where he was going, so deeply was he wrapped up in his own thoughts. It was long after dark, and a veil of fog shrouded the yellow light of the gas-lamps. As he moved along the pavement, with his head bent and his eyes upon the flag-stones, he ran against a large figure in a heavy greatcoat, and drew back hastily with an apology for his clumsiness. At the sound of his voice the other man started violently and seized him unceremoniously by the arm. He looked up, and perceived that it was his father.

'Nigel!' exclaimed Colonel Maystone in a trembling voice. 'Is it you?'

'Yes, father,' he answered.

The Colonel drew him under the nearest lamp and stood gazing into his eyes with his hands upon his shoulders, quite oblivious of the passers-by. Nigel could see the tears trickling down his ruddy, wrinkled cheeks, and his lips quivering under his white moustache.

'My son!' he murmured in a broken voice. 'My son! Which was dead, and is alive again; which was lost, and is found! You infernal young scoundrel, why didn't you come back to me?'

Then he passed his arm through Nigel's, and led him away, talking and laughing feverishly, but stopping from time to time to look at him again and call himself an old fool, in a manner that was quite hysterical.

## CHAPTER III

*'Le seul bien qui me reste au monde  
Est d'avoir quelquefois pleuré.'*

LADY SEATHWAITE had at last taken her brother-in-law into favour. The one thing necessary to earn her good graces was worldly success, which, strangely enough, she appeared to consider an indispensable sign of spiritual grace. Now that Rafford was standing for Parliament, and had begun to show abilities of no despicable kind, she persisted in looking upon him as a reclaimed sinner. The next step was to wish to reward him. And as matrimony was, in her opinion, the crown of life, she set herself to plot in the hope of capturing a wife for him.

Her mind pointed towards Gladys. She had assumed that Gladys had been heartbroken by the death of her husband, and had never ceased to bewail the tragic termination of what she invariably described as a most happy union. But now that two years had passed since Presterley's death, she felt that it was time to bind up the bleeding wounds in the widow's heart, and send her forth again in quest of those contracts which are made in heaven, and, apparently, are apt to get a little damaged in their transit to earth.

The news of Rafford's ill-health, and consequent abandonment of his candidature, did not affect her much. She was accustomed to bear other folks' misfortunes with equanimity, and it was a fixed belief with her that the idea of



ill-health was always exaggerated by every one except herself.

'Let him go to Africa by all means,' she said to Seathwaite, when he told her the news. 'He is probably overworked, and a holiday will do him good. As to his being seriously ill, I don't believe it for a moment, and I think it very weak of you to be so cast down about it. I intend to show more self-control. We shall probably see him back in six months, and there won't be an election as soon as you think, so that no harm will be done.'

'I hope you are right,' replied her husband sadly.

'Of course I am right. He will come back and marry Gladys.'

'But has either of them shown any inclination for matrimony?' asked Lord Seathwaite doubtfully.

'I think they will both see that it is their duty to marry. Gladys cannot pine for poor Herbert to the end of her days; and Charlie is showing such good sense in other ways, that I do not doubt he will realise his duty in this case. He *ought* to marry,' said her ladyship decidedly, 'and Gladys is just the wife for him.'

'But do you think there is any special attraction or affection?'

'My dear Seathwaite, what a ridiculous question! At their age they will take a common-sense view of the matter, I should hope.'

Lord Seathwaite meekly submitted; but he was anxious and unhappy about Charlie, and connected him in his thoughts more with funerals than with weddings, which was perhaps characteristic.

The gods did not greatly assist Lady Seathwaite in the accomplishment of her plans; for after she had engaged both Gladys and Rafford to spend Christmas at Sandleford, the latter wrote to say that he was too busy with preparations

for his journey to be able to leave London at the time specified, and that he would not be able to come till the 30th of December. Lady Seathwaite was slightly annoyed. It was obvious that not much business could be done in London during Christmas week, and she half suspected that Rafford had an inkling of her design, and did not wish to be too long in the house with Gladys. As Gladys was engaged to go elsewhere on New Year's Day, they would have little more than one day together. However, destinies may be settled in a shorter time than that, and Lady Seathwaite did not abandon hope.

Gladys arrived with some misgiving in her mind, as she had expected to find a party in the house, and was greatly relieved to learn that the Seathwaites were absolutely alone. She had little taste nowadays for large gatherings, and did not appreciate a week of social festivity so much as she used to do.

As things were, she enjoyed herself more than she had ever anticipated. She found a congenial companion in the eldest boy, who was home from Eton for his holidays. He was a bright, resolute lad of about fifteen, and resembled his uncle more than his father. They skated together and walked together, and he took her into the inmost recesses of his boyish confidence. He was a keen young sportsman with military ambitions, and was delighted with the ready way in which she entered into his enthusiasm on his favourite subjects; so much so, that he expressed a deep regret that the unfortunate accident of sex should have debarred her from similar pursuits.

'You ought to have been a man,' he said, in admiring tones. It was the greatest compliment he could think of.

He cherished an enthusiastic admiration for his uncle, to which he constantly gave expression. Gladys listened with

mingled feelings. She was glad to hear Rafford praised, yet the praise left her a little sad.

The beautiful old season passed in what seemed to her a very appropriate manner. It was what the poor people on the place described as an old-fashioned Christmas, and the ground was white with snow and the ponds frozen over. The soft associations of centuries were revived by the familiar details; the church bells ringing faintly in the frosty air, while the moonbeams slept on the silent, white world; the ruddy-faced villagers singing the familiar hymns in the grey light of dawn under the windows; the gathering in the little dark church; the old house decked out with holly and mistletoe; the excited enjoyment of the children; the festivities for labourers and servants;—these things affected each according to his or her temperament. Lord Seathwaite was mildly genial, Lady Seathwaite was placidly amiable, and slightly inclined to be didactically pious. Gladys felt as if she were in a dream.

Late on the day appointed, Rafford arrived. She did not see him till they met at dinner, and was a little taken aback by the easy self-possession with which he greeted her. In spite of herself, the meeting caused her a moment's agitation. But he showed no sign of disturbance in his quiet, courteous manner. When she did not look at him and see the change in his appearance, she could almost believe that the past had been a dream, and that they were back in the early days, as she listened to his unaltered voice discussing, in the well-remembered, half-jesting way, the chance topics that turned up. Somehow it was painful to her, and she was glad when the evening was over.

The next morning she managed to avoid him. But after luncheon he asked her to go for a walk with him, and as Lady Seathwaite supported the idea, she was unable to refuse. Her youthful ally had gone away to shoot with

a neighbour, and she was compelled to face this *little-by-little* companionship. She was not afraid of it for her own sake. Nothing could bring back the dead to life. But she instinctively felt that it would be embarrassing, and perhaps painful, for both of them, and she would rather have escaped it.

They started out on the hard, beaten-down snow which covered the roads. The pale gold sun hung low in the faint blue of the cloudless, mist-draped sky, and the white sheet around sparkled and glittered like a bed of diamonds. The dark stems of the trees broke the monotony of tone, and the walls of the house seemed to glow in contrast to the universal white, as the sunbeams lighted their dull red surface. The air was light and still. There was no wind, and every chance sound seemed sharpened and intensified by the prevailing silence. The muffled grinding of a cart-wheel, the bark of a dog, the hoarse cry of a rook, floated to their ears. But, on the whole, the world seemed hushed, and sound or sign of life and motion was rare enough.

Both of them were inclined towards silence. The fact that words did not flow readily seemed a revival of many experiences.

'You are going to-morrow, aren't you?' he said at length.

'Yes,' she answered. 'I shall be sorry. I am going on to a commonplace party, and it has been so nice to be quiet and natural here.'

'I wanted to have this opportunity of saying good-bye to you.'

'Are you starting soon?'

'I sail from Plymouth next week. Maystone is coming over from Torquay to see me off. He is staying there with his father.'

'Oh, well,' she said lightly, 'I hope we shall see you back before very long quite strong and well again.'

She was inclined to believe it. Lady Seathwaite had spoken with such confidence of the exaggeration which had arisen concerning the seriousness of his condition, that Gladys had almost been convinced by her. He looked away towards the sun.

'I do not think it likely that I shall ever come back,' he said quietly. 'I don't mean that I expect to die soon. But my only chance of life is to stay in a milder climate.'

'Don't you think the doctors have exaggerated matters?' she asked.

'Yes, I do. They don't think I am likely to live long, even in Africa, and I mean to disappoint them in that way if I can. Not that it very much matters. At any rate, I shall hope to die in my boots, and not flicker out in the way I should here.'

'I wanted to tell you how sorry I am,' she murmured in a helpless sort of way. Even now she could not overcome a slight feeling of hostility towards him, chiefly caused by the consciousness that some faint echoes of the old passion were sounding in her heart. Was she never to shake off his influence?

'Don't tell me now,' he answered, smiling at her with a touch of the old mockery, which increased her rebellious impulse. 'We had better talk of commonplace things. They were always the safest for us.'

She made no reply, and they walked on. But they adopted his suggestion and talked of ordinary things. She found herself thinking that, after all, their farewell would pass off in a matter-of-fact way. At once her heart began to rebel against such a possibility. It really was hard that she never knew what mood to expect in herself next.

The short afternoon waned quickly as they walked. They turned homewards. Rafford began to tire a little,

and they moved more slowly. As they were both well wrapped up, they did not fear the quiet, frosty air.

At length they came on to the bridge which spanned the river. Instinctively they stopped for a moment, and went to look over the side, their minds throbbing with the memories that came back to them. The water was swirling and chattering as usual below, though its current looked dark and discoloured between the snowy banks. The same bushes still bent over its surface, loaded with heavy white caps and clasped round their stems with faint edgings of ice. They gazed at the river and at the dark woods, and then turned and looked towards the house. The sun had nearly set. His pallor had changed into a crimson flush as he floated over a bank of luminous purple haze.

'We haven't lost our old habit of talking in silences,' said Rafford, with a smile.

She did not answer.

'Dear old place!' he went on, gazing dreamily at the familiar landscape. 'It is a little bit of a wrench to leave it. I think it is the only kind of wrench I am capable of feeling now.'

'Oh, my God!' she exclaimed in a broken voice, 'how can you keep on suggesting such ideas and digging up such dead things now?'

'I am sorry if you mind,' he answered gently. 'But this is probably the last talk I shall ever have with you, and there are one or two things I want to say. We can't keep up the pretence quite to the end.'

She turned away from the parapet of the bridge, and they began to walk slowly towards the house. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, and she made no reply to his remark. He looked at her in a hesitating way.

'I don't want to make any claim on your mercy,' he said,

'but I think you have been misunderstanding me a little for the last two years.'

She tried to speak, but the effort seemed to be too great for her. After a pause he went on again—

'I am afraid you thought that I had treated you very lightly and contemptuously; that I had only amused myself with you up to a certain point; and that when matters began to grow serious, I backed out in the most brutal way. I know it must have seemed so to you. Will you believe me if I declare that it is not the case?'

Her lips moved once or twice, and at last she said in a muffled voice, 'Is it any good to go back to all this now? I am quite ready to believe that your motives were not at all bad. The fault was more mine than yours. I put myself at your mercy; I showed you my weakness. It is no good pretending that I was not——'

Her voice failed for a minute, but she mastered it and went on again. 'You know, without my telling you, that I loved you; that I was ready to give my life to you. You did not want it. Perhaps you were satiated with such gifts. Anyhow, you refused it, and you deserve credit for doing so. But you can't believe that I could feel the same afterwards. I am only human. I can't be expected not to associate you always with thoughts of humiliation.'

'I know all that,' he answered. 'That is how it must seem to you. But Heaven knows there need be no humiliation on your side. It was not because I despised you that I behaved as I did; it was because I looked up to you. I'm no saint. I have done rather worse than other men, on the whole, perhaps—certainly not better. But, at any rate, I couldn't treat you like the other women I have been mixed up with. They were merely episodes in my life, and I an episode in theirs, but you have been something very different. I couldn't let you sacrifice your-

self for me ; I wasn't worth it at any price. I suppose I'm an unscrupulous blackguard in many ways, and I certainly don't believe there is anything I would stick at under certain circumstances. But I couldn't do this.'

She turned upon him quite fiercely.

'Don't you think your scruples might have begun a little sooner?' she exclaimed. 'You certainly left me my respectability. I am no worse than the other virtuous humbugs who chiefly make up the world of decorum. But you robbed me of something far more precious. You took the romance, the sap, of my life, and now it is a withered stump. You have had the best of my heart. I am not in love with you now, and yet I can never be in love with any one else. That is your work. Oh, I know you aren't altogether to blame! It was partly my own fault, partly Fate. But it is so. My life is and must be a desert—and it might have been a garden full of flowers.'

They had left the park, and were wandering through the long shrubberies which led up to the house, full of little winding paths. Gladys' voice, which had thrilled with vibrating passion, though her tone was deep and low, broke off in a sob. Rafford drew a deep breath.

'Will you try to forgive me?' he asked. 'I am very sorry, though that isn't much use. I don't want to try to excuse myself; but if you have had to pay pretty high, I haven't come off scot free. You talk about your life being a desert. What is mine?'

She turned her eyes towards him for a moment. A softer look seemed to be struggling into them before she dropped them again.

'Gladys,' he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, 'you don't know what I have been through concerning you. If ever I have loved a woman in my life—it may be that I never really have—but if I have, that woman has been you. You



have haunted my thoughts as no other woman has done. You have been in my mind for years. You have stood between me and every other woman that I have met since I have known you.' But what good would it have done you if I had told you this, or even confessed it to myself? I know my own nature too well. I could never make any woman happy, and the higher her nature the more unhappy I should make her. Ah!' he went on, with a sad smile, 'you don't know what a shiftless, unbalanced creature I am. I could never endure matrimony; I should be faithless to my wife out of sheer perversity. I could never stick to any one or anything steadily. I wasn't made for these days. I ought to have lived in another age, when the world's ideas were different. I am a hopeless failure here.'

'Oh, forgive me!' exclaimed Gladys in contrite tones; 'I have said so much more than I meant. I have blamed you when I should have blamed myself. I know your nature. I have always known how different you were from the ordinary, humdrum, respectable man. That was why I loved you.'

Her voice sank to a whisper, and she laid her hand on his arm imploringly. For the moment she almost believed that the old passion was alive again. But it was only a flickering gleam from the embers.

He looked down into her eyes with the same sad smile.

'Poor little woman!' he said, 'we are both rather astray in life. But things will come right for you yet, though you don't think so now. You are very young still, and Fate has many things in store for you. Even happiness is possible for you, however much you may doubt it. But I am played out. I have been a hopeless failure from the first, and I shall be a hopeless failure to the end. Whether that end comes soon or late, I don't care. I shall play the game to the last counter, but, goodness knows, I shan't care

twopence how soon it is over. I have had some good things in life—health, and enjoyment, and friendship, and even a little love. But I have not had anything that was not half spoiled and half wasted. The best thing I have gained has been the memory of you. Let me keep that, unclouded by your anger against me, for the little time that is left to me.'

'Dear friend!' she whispered, 'I have nothing in my heart for you but sympathy and pity and love. I know that our lives could never have run together, and now I do not regret it. Regret and anger are both things of the past. Nothing is left now that you would not wish to be there.'

He bent down towards her, and their lips met in a long farewell kiss. Then they drew apart with a last lingering look, and moved on towards the house. It was nearly dark, and the world around them lay in ghostly stillness under its dim white covering. They felt as if they were in a spirit-land.

All that evening Rafford was unusually cheerful, and even Lady Seathwaite thawed before his genial gaiety. Gladys was silent, but her heart was calm.

The next morning she left, immediately after breakfast. Her farewell with Rafford was brief—a short, searching glance and smile, and a momentary squeeze of the hand. Then she got into the carriage, and was driven away over the dazzling snow, looking back out of the window once to see him standing on the broad stone steps, waving his hand to her, with the same quiet smile on his face. It was the end.

## CHAPTER IV

### DROPPING ANCHOR

ONE evening towards the end of January, Nigel Maystone turned into Hyde Park at the Marble Arch, and started to walk across it. The winter sun had long set, or, rather, the faint effect of his existence, which had been apparent in the dull grey light of the afternoon, had now faded. Down Park Lane and along the Bayswater Road glittering rows of gas-lamps showed between the bare trees, and a multitude of lights flashed and flitted on the vehicles, whose incessant roar began to grow fainter in the distance as he walked.

Suddenly he perceived a small figure in front of him which seemed familiar. He hastened forward, and found, as he had believed, that it was Gladys.

‘What are you doing in the Park at this time?’ he asked.

She turned towards him. Her face looked curiously white under her veil, and her eyes shone through it, dark and yet brilliant.

‘Oh, it’s you!’ she said. ‘What a funny question for *you* to ask! Have you definitely enrolled yourself under Mrs. Grundy now? Why shouldn’t I be in the Park as much as any one else?’

‘There are such queer people about at this time,’ he answered.

‘I don’t know that they are much queerer than we are,

after all,' she answered. Then she glanced round. It was a cold, windy evening, and only a thin stream of pedestrians straggled across the open space. A few draggled, untidy-looking women of the lowest class prowled about on the gravel-path, or crouched, huddled up, on the seats.

'You are not very consistent,' she said. 'Why should you make different rules for yourself and for me? You think yourself the equal of all these poor creatures. Why may I not be the same?'

'Oh, but you are different from any one else,' he answered, gazing down at her pale face. The darkness gave him courage, and his tone was full of deep meaning.

'Ah!' she said, 'you men are all the same. Your general theories are never to be applied to particular women. But I choose to apply them to myself. In what way am I better than these poor things? Circumstances have shielded me, while they have been defenceless. By mere luck I have retained what the world calls innocence; and because I have managed to escape by the skin of my teeth from the few dangers which have come in my path, I am to be regarded as something higher and holier than these women, who have never had a chance. How many of us, I should like to know, would come better out of the same trials and temptations than they have done! We are all walking on ice, and we need not pride ourselves too highly if we have the luck not to fall through.'

'I think you are one of God's angels,' he said in a low voice.

'We are all that,' she answered, with a laugh; 'only, most of us get our wings more or less singed, and some of us only have second-hand wings to start with.'

Maystone made no reply, but glanced round at the open, vague distances of the park. The lights gleamed and flickered behind and on his left, and were reflected from

the surface of the Serpentine in front. On the right the dark group of trees stood out against the sky, which mirrored in its pale, unnatural hue the glare of the vast city. The roar and clatter of the streets had sunk to a murmur, like the sound of far-off waves. His heart seemed to swell within him. He dared not look at Gladys again, for fear he should seize her in his arms and press her to his heart—a proceeding which might give rise to comment even there.

They walked on through the weird stream of dark, indistinct figures who loitered around, or hurried past, dimly seen by the faint light of the stars above. The searching wind caused them to bend their heads, and made conversation difficult.

‘Are you doing anything particular to-night?’ Gladys asked. ‘If not, you may as well come to dinner with me, unless your newly-born respectability will be shocked at the idea of my entertaining you alone.’

He accepted with delight, and when they emerged from the park he left her and hurried home to dress. The ceremony of dressing for dinner still appealed to him as a new and delightful sensation after his long sojourn in the world of squalor. The whole Social question seemed epitomised in a white tie.

Dinner was truly a festival for him that evening. Life had some good moments left. They had finished the meal before he properly awoke from a dreamlike condition and understood that they had really been talking—about what, he scarcely knew. Vague fancies and chance reflections, broken by the flicker of her ever-present humour. They moved into her drawing-room for coffee, and she gave him permission to smoke. The shaded lamps shed a soft glow on the dainty furniture in the little room, and his senses dimly grasped the impression of graceful, delicate drapery,

and rare colours, and quivering firelight, and scented flowers. It seemed a rightful setting for this fair human creature.

'Tell me about Mr. Rafford,' she said. 'Did you see him off?'

'Yes. I went over to Plymouth and saw the last of him. He went off in his usual quiet, unobtrusive way. I daresay I was a fool; it was nearly too much for me; but he smiled and joked, and took everything in his usual fashion. I don't think life has much left to frighten or attract him. Wherever he goes he will always treat it as a rather inferior joke for himself, and try to make it something rather better for any one he comes in contact with. It is no good repining or making a fuss over him. I couldn't tell you what his loss means to me. But, at any rate, I have learned from him not to sit down and whimper about things; and though no man will ever be the same to me again, I shall try to borrow some of his pluck for my own fate.'

'I don't think you require to borrow pluck from any one else,' said Gladys, after a dreamy pause, in which she had smothered a faint sigh.

'That shows how little you know me,' he answered. 'I am an awful coward. Do you know that a little time ago I almost lost hope?'

'Hope!' she exclaimed. 'What have we to do with hope? Hope is a plaything for children.'

'Oh no,' he exclaimed earnestly. 'It isn't, and you don't think so really. There's so much to do and so much to live for. One has hardly begun yet.'

She smiled rather sadly.

'You are just the same as ever,' she said. 'You will always be sanguine, and you will always try to make me the same. But I am afraid you will hardly succeed.'

'I shan't leave off trying,' he answered. 'I shall convince you against your will.'

'Oh, not against my will,' she answered despairingly. 'I should be only too glad.'

They sat silent for some minutes. Maystone dared not trust himself to speak. Presently she asked—

'What are your plans? Are you going to live with your father?'

Maystone laughed.

'No,' he answered. 'Poor old chap, he was so bored with me when we were alone together! He was awfully good, but he couldn't enter into my way of looking at things at all, and it bored him dreadfully. I think it hastened another matter, which has apparently been brewing for some time. He is going to marry again.'

'Really! I hope some one nice.'

'Yes, very nice, and a very old friend of his—the widow of a former brother officer. I am very glad, for I think he will be happy with her, and, as she will be there to look after him, it will set me free. I shouldn't have liked to leave him quite alone, even though my presence is such a doubtful advantage to him.'

'And what do you propose to do?'

'I am going to try my hand at a new game. My father had a farm left him, a year or two ago, down in the south, near Stainmouth. The tenant has just thrown it on his hands, and I am going to try what I can do with it. You see, I have lived in the country most of my life, and I know something about farming, as I have played at it a little before.'

'Near Stainmouth,' she said thoughtfully. 'It was near there that I spent my honeymoon. It is a beautiful part of the country. I did not like it then, but I feel differently towards it now. Time softens and beautifies things.'

It was the most direct reference she had ever made to

the unhappiness of her married life. Maystone pitied her for her sad memories. He longed to make the world look a little brighter to her.

'I remember,' he said. 'I saw you there. It has better associations for me in some ways. I spent a very happy holiday there with Charlie Rafford, in spite of the fact that the world was looking rather black to me just then.'

She had no need to ask the reason, and did not comment on his remark.

'Do you think you will like a quiet country life?' she asked. 'It is rather a violent change in your plans.'

'Not so much as it seems,' he answered. 'It will be a breathing-space in which I can collect my ideas. I don't suppose I am likely to stay there all my life; but, as you know, I am rather inclined to trust to things being made plain to me. I expect my destiny will unfold itself in time. And anyhow, I shall find plenty to occupy me, and have plenty of room for trying experiments. I am afraid I haven't lost my old theories,' he said, with a laugh. 'There will be plenty of human beings near me to play games with. I may develop into a model employer, a revolutionary agitator, or a Tory member of Parliament. Who knows? It doesn't much matter. There will always be human hearts to work for and try to help; and as long as one is aiming at that, nothing else matters very much.'

'I am afraid your optimism is incorrigible,' she said.

'I am afraid it is; and, after all, I have had some encouragement. I see things more clearly now, and I don't regret the past three years. Poor old London! I have given it my best, however worthless it may be, and I think I am under no obligation to offer it any more of myself at present.'

Gladys rose and went to the window. She drew aside the curtain and gazed out into the street.



'No,' she said, 'London is a little jealous, and apt to be rather exacting. I also have had enough of it for a time. I don't think I shall trouble it much more just now.'

He moved over to the window and stood beside her. The long rows of lamps gleamed in the dark street, and by their light they could dimly see the dark wayfarers hurrying along the pavement. Omnibuses and cabs rolled by, with their broken roar, and further off the less varying murmur of wider traffic seemed to form a background of sound.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'I hardly know,' she answered, rather wearily. 'Somewhere abroad, I expect. It does not matter very much. I rather envy you with your farm and your interests. I should like to pay you a visit there, but I suppose even we could hardly defy conventionality so much as that.'

Maystone's heart suddenly beat violently. He moved closer to her.

'Unless you would come and stay always,' he said in a low voice. She turned towards him with a doubtful, troubled, hesitating look in her eyes. She glanced into his face, then at the ground; then she looked up again with a wavering, uncertain smile, and he caught her in his arms and folded her to his heart. She struggled to get away, but he held her the closer.

'No,' she panted, 'let me go. It isn't fair. I am cheating you.'

'How?' he asked, straining her to his heart, and looking down into her face with a pleading smile.

'Oh, I can't take it all and give you nothing,' she exclaimed in distress. 'I have nothing of that kind to give now. My heart is worn out—I think it is dead.'

'I will nurse it back to life,' he whispered.

'You can't, you can't. It is too late for this sort of

thing. Let me go! If I could love any one, it would be you, but I should be robbing you if I came like this.'

'You couldn't rob me,' he said. 'I have given you all. Take it, dearest; I will be content with so little in return. I will live and hope. I want nothing more than you can give now. Perhaps some day it may grow into something greater.'

She shook her head, and made one last ineffectual effort to get away. Then she gave up the struggle with a faint sob, smiling at him through tear-dimmed eyes as he bent breathlessly over her, drawing nearer to her lips. She allowed him to rest on them for a moment, and then sank her head upon his breast with a sigh of helpless content, like a tired child.

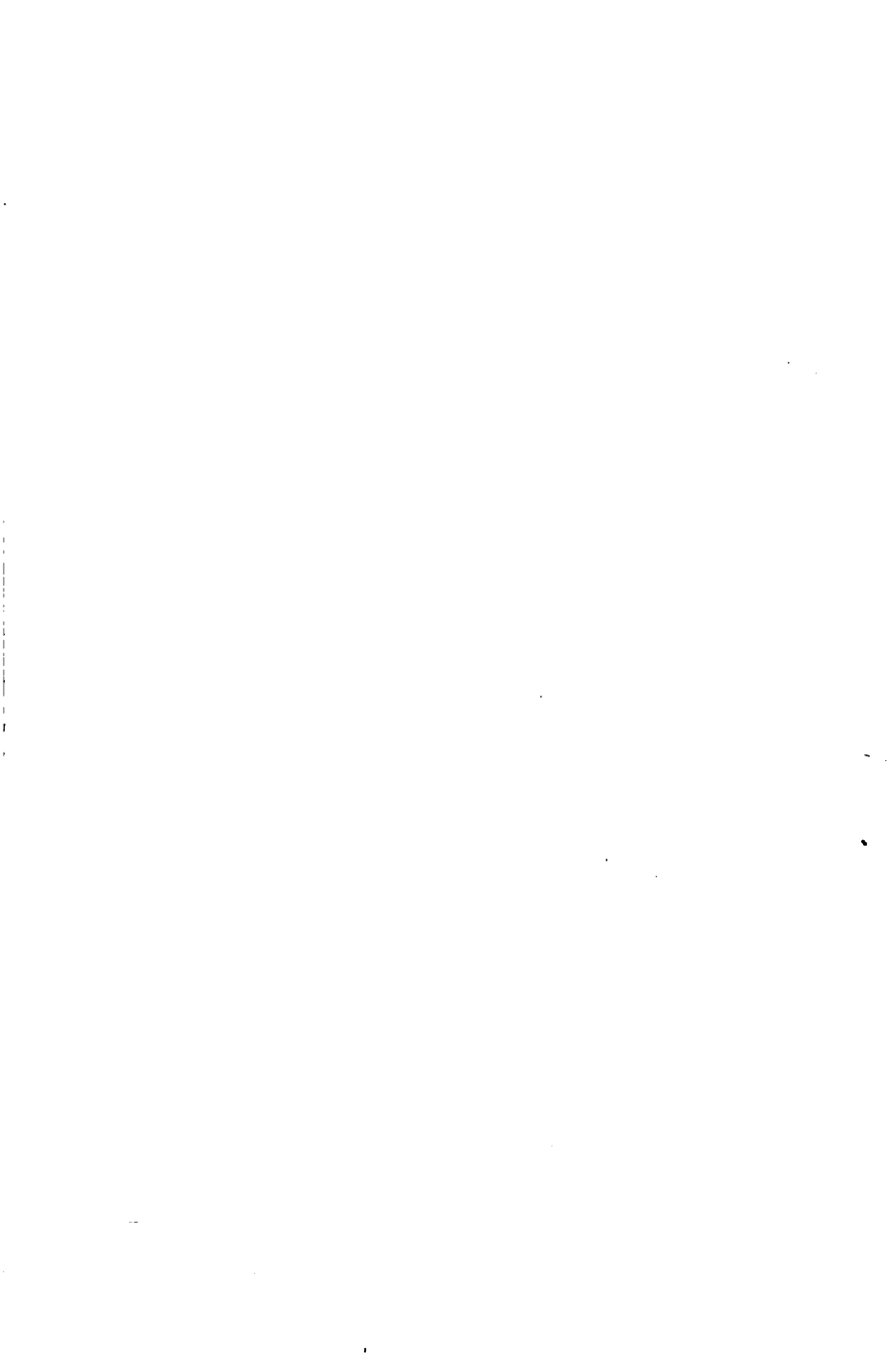
'Gladys,' he whispered, 'I have waited so long!'

She glanced up for a moment with a brighter smile.

'Four years,' she answered.

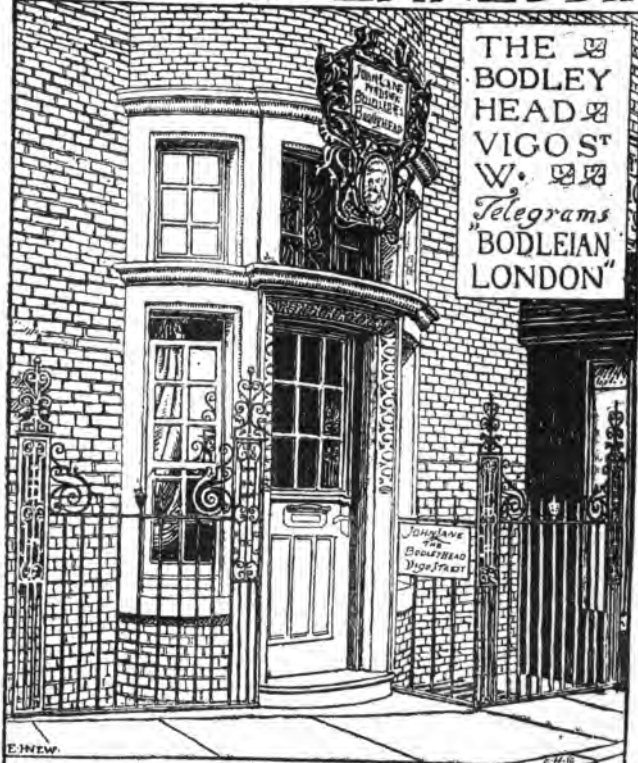
'No,' he said, 'all my life—if not some centuries before.'

The faint roar of the streets alone broke the silence of the room as they stood there. The ceaseless stream was flowing still, the storm was raging and tossing about the leaves of human life—the hope, the joy, the despair; the suffering, the health, the sickness; the riches and the want. The turmoil would never end, and these two might not fly from their share in it. But for a brief moment they were granted a lull in the tempest, a sheltered haven of peace.



JOHN LANE

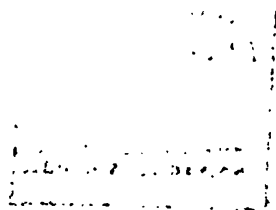
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